

Dozens killed in Shiite neighborhood

US military massacre in Baghdad's Sadr City

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In one of the largest raids into the largely Shiite Sadr City district of eastern Baghdad, US forces killed some 26 people and detained another 17, according to an announcement by a military spokesman Saturday. The early-morning raid produced an explosion of violence, with US tanks and helicopters opening fire in the densely populated working-class neighborhood and destroying both vehicles and entire buildings.

While US military officials portrayed the incident as a pitched battle between US troops and armed militants using roadside bombs, rocket-propelled grenades and automatic weapons, residents who spoke to Western reporters afterwards said there was no organized response by the Mahdi Army militia, loyal to Shiite leader Moqtada al-Sadr.

Despite the claims of fierce and close-quarter combat, there were no US casualties reported, a fact that suggests the one-sided character of the engagement.

There were conflicting reports on the toll of dead and wounded. A representative of al-Sadr who spoke to the media in Najaf said that four members of one family, including women, were killed by a US bomb, and another 16 young men died. "There were no clashes between the Mahdi army and occupation forces," he said. "We are condemning this attack, which targeted the innocent people in their homes, and we are calling on the government to open an investigation with the occupation forces to find out what happened."

An eyewitness who spoke with the *Washington Post* confirmed aspects of the account given by the al-Sadr spokesman, including the killing of four family members in their house. He described "random shooting" in the neighborhood but no direct attacks on US troops. "What's the goal of this savage act?" he asked. "What are they trying to do—make the people hate Americans more or simply kill the Iraqis?"

Other eyewitnesses told the Associated Press (AP) that US troops had opened fire without warning, shooting into buildings whose residents were mostly asleep. Basheer Ahmed, a Sadr City resident, said, "At about 4 a.m., a big American convoy with tanks came and began to open fire on houses, bombing them. What did we do? We didn't even retaliate. There was no resistance."

An Iraqi policeman wounded in the raid, Montadhar Kareem, spoke to AP from his bed at Al Sadr General Hospital, where he was being treated. "The bombing became more intense, and I was injured by shrapnel in both my legs and in my left shoulder," he said.

Another resident was interviewed while watching a funeral procession for several of the victims. She said, "We are being hit while we are peacefully sleeping in our houses. Is that fair?"

Eleven-year-old Laith Jassim spoke to the *Los Angeles Times* after he was wounded in the shoulder by shrapnel. "When I was injured, my brothers were not able to send me to the hospital because the Americans were shooting," he said, asking, "Do I look like a Mahdi army member to you?"

US spokesman Lt. Col. Christopher Garver repeated the claim, invariably made after every military massacre, that US troops only kill armed combatants. "Everyone who got shot was shooting at U.S. troops at the time," he said. "Every structure and vehicle that the troops on the ground engaged were being used for hostile intent," he said.

Such blanket assurances insult the intelligence of the public, since both the officer and the reporters who took down his statement are well aware that it is impossible for soldiers, opening fire in pitch darkness in a crowded urban area, to know precisely who and what they are hitting, let alone give assurances that "every" target is a

military one.

Meanwhile, there was an unconfirmed report of an even more gruesome US massacre in Diyala province, the focus of the military offensive entitled Arrowhead Ripper, begun June 15. The Iraqi Islamic Party, the Sunni component of the US-imposed coalition government, published a statement Sunday claiming that more than 350 people have been killed in Baquba, the provincial capital, in what they termed a “collective punishment” of the population, treating all residents of the city as insurgents.

The statement declared, “Neighborhoods in western Baquba have witnessed, since last week, fierce attacks by occupation forces within Operation Arrowhead Ripper ... The forces shelled these neighborhoods with helicopters, destroying more than 150 houses and killing more than 350 citizens, their bodies still under wreckage, in addition to arresting scores of citizens.”

Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, a Shiite elected to his position with the backing of the al-Sadr movement, issued a statement condemning the attack on the eastern Baghdad. “The Iraqi government totally rejects US military operations...conducted without prior approval from the Iraqi military command,” he declared. “Anyone who breaches the military command orders will face investigation.”

Maliki’s government appears even more impotent than the US-backed stooge regime of President Hamid Karzai in Afghanistan. While Karzai is openly derided as the “mayor of Kabul,” because his political realm is limited to the Afghan capital city, Maliki cannot control even that much. After he blocked one proposed US invasion of Sadr City last fall, Maliki was compelled to endorse future incursions as part of the ongoing US military “surge” that has mobilized an additional 30,000 combat troops. His protests over the latest US atrocity in his own capital will be brushed aside.

It appears that the raid into Sadr City was aimed at promoting the US campaign against alleged Iranian involvement in the guerilla resistance to the US occupation of Iraq. The military spokesman, Lt. Col. Garver, said that the 17 men detained were suspected of “close ties to Iranian terror networks.”

Lt. Gen. David Petraeus, the top US commander in Iraq, told reporters Saturday that he would shortly “lay out for the press” the extent of Iranian support of “secret cells” of Mahdi Army militiamen. “There’s

actually been operational...direction provided to these militia organizations by the Iranian Quds Force,” he claimed. He made this statement during a visit to a southern Baghdad neighborhood where a powerful armor-piercing roadside bomb killed one US soldier in a convoy of Humvees. Three others were wounded.

The raid on Sadr City comes at the conclusion of another bloody month, in which more than 1,200 Iraqi civilians died, according to government figures, which are considered low estimates. Some 101 US troops were killed in June, bringing the three-month total to 331, the highest such quarterly toll since the war began. During the same period, 22 British soldiers were killed, more than in any similar period except the actual invasion in March 2003. For the six months January through June, 574 US soldiers, Marines and airmen have died in Iraq, a staggering 62 percent increase over the same period in 2006.

In another development Saturday, two American soldiers were charged with premeditated murder in the killing of three Iraqis near the town of Iskandariyah, south of Baghdad. The killings were separate incidents but had a common methodology: in all three cases, according to the charges, the soldiers planted weapons with their victims and claimed they were insurgents, then lied about the killings to investigators.



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