

Trial exposes Pentagon “baiting” program in Iraq

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Three US Army snipers face charges stemming from their participation in a Pentagon program of baiting areas with ammunition and explosives in order to lure Iraqis and subsequently kill them.

The court-martial of one soldier, Spec. Jorge Sandoval Jr., began Wednesday in Baghdad. He faces a possible sentence of life in prison if convicted.

Sandoval, along with Staff Sgt. Michael Hensley and Sgt Evan Vela, are charged with premeditated murder. Vela and Hensley also stand accused of planting evidence on the bodies of those killed. All three men are part of the Headquarters and Headquarters Company, 1st Battalion, 501st Infantry Regiment, 4th Brigade (Airborne), 25th Infantry Division, based in Fort Richardson, Alaska.

Military prosecutors say the deaths occurred between April and June in an area 30 miles south of Baghdad. Sandoval is charged with five killings. In one case he allegedly placed detonation wire next to the body of a victim, and in another case he planted an AK-47 assault rifle. He allegedly shot another Iraqi man execution style with a 9mm pistol.

The Pentagon’s Asymmetrical Warfare Group developed the program and met with US Army Ranger sniper teams in January to give them equipment.

In a sworn statement published by the *Washington Post*, Capt. Matthew Didier of the US Army Rangers, and attached to the 501st, said, “Basically, we would put an item out there and watch it.” According to Didier, the “drop items” provided by the army consisted of bullets, plastic explosives and bomb detonation cords.

“If someone found an item, picked it up and attempted to leave with the item,” Didier explained, “we would engage [fire upon] the individual, as I saw this as a sign that they would use the item against US

Forces.”

James Ross of Human Rights Watch criticized the tactic, saying that not only does it present obvious human rights problems, but added, “It would seem to me that there are all sorts of reasons that civilians would want to pick up ammunition which is sitting on the ground.”

Eugene Fidell, president of the National Institute of Military Justice, also expressed deep reservations about the program, stating, “In a country that is awash in armaments and magazines and implements of war, if [we shot someone] every time someone picked up something that was potentially useful as a weapon, you might as well ask every Iraqi to walk around with a target on his back.”

Though the soldiers stand accused of planting evidence, which is not specifically part of the program, defense attorneys argue that the classified program may have led to the soldiers’ actions because it blurred the legal and ethical lines of combat.

It has also been reported that not all soldiers in the unit knew the purpose of the “drop items.” One soldier who had not been briefed about the classified program, Pfc. David C. Petta, told the court that he believed the items had been supplied for the purpose of planting on the body of someone they “knew was a bad guy but we didn’t have the evidence to show for it.”

In other words, the Army soldiers understood the program as a tacit carte blanche to kill, since noncombatant deaths would be covered up by the planting of phony evidence of insurgent activity.

Army spokesman Paul Boyce denied the existence of the use of “drop weapons” and declared that the Army does not publicly discuss specific methods of combat.

Vela’s father, Curtis Carnahan, expressed concern that the cases were being rushed. He also worried that

holding the proceedings in a war zone will obscure the facts from the US public. He told the *Washington Post*, “It’s an injustice that is being done to them. I feel like you can’t prosecute our soldiers for acts of war and threaten them with years and years of confinement when this program, if it comes to the light of day, was clearly coming from higher levels.” He continued, “All those people who said ‘go use this stuff’ just disappeared, like they never sanctioned it.”

It is clear from the evidence so far presented that the men were acting under orders, and that the orders came from the Pentagon itself. That such orders were issued in the first place speaks to the criminality of the war, which is directed against the Iraqi population as a whole.

The practice of luring and killing Iraqis by the army snipers is emblematic of the proclivity to violence and demoralization among wide sections of the US occupation force as the war drags on into its fifth year. As in the cases of torture at Abu Ghraib and massacres of civilians in Haditha and elsewhere, the soldiers perpetrating these atrocities are guilty of war crimes and should face prosecution. Under regulations established by the US in the early days of the occupation, however, they cannot be held accountable for their actions in Iraqi courts.

In those US military trials that have been convened, those in the highest levels of the military and government who have issued the orders leading to the crimes have not be prosecuted or sentenced. Just as the policies that led to the abuses at Abu Ghraib can be traced directly to the office of former Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, the program that led to the “baiting” actions of the soldiers in this case has come directly from the Pentagon. However, no Pentagon officials will be charged.

It is telling that no protest against such tactics has come from congressional Democrats or Republicans. Fearing accusations of being “anti-American” or “not supporting the troops,” they stand by as basic human decency is sacrificed in favor of the brutal methods employed in the colonialist war and occupation.

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