

US military admits soldiers killed unarmed Iraqi civilians

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American military officials acknowledged Sunday that three civilians killed by US soldiers June 25, described as “criminals” in an original press release, were “law-abiding” citizens on their way to work.

An automobile driven by Hafeth Aboud Mahdi, the manager of the Rasheed Bank inside the Baghdad airport, and carrying two female employees of the bank, Suroor Ahmed, 32, and Maha Youssef, 31, was targeted by US soldiers and blasted with gunfire. The car’s three occupants died instantly.

The vehicle had already passed through a major checkpoint leading into the airport, which involved a comprehensive search for arms and explosives. The bank employees were driving down the principal civilian road to the airport.

A US military convoy from the 4th Brigade Combat Team, 10th Mountain Division (Light) was on that same road by mistake, having taken a wrong turn. The convoy parked at the side of the road when one of its four vehicles developed mechanical problems.

Soldiers claimed that Mahdi’s car was speeding toward them and that it failed to respond to warning shots. It was then “engaged with small arms fire,” according to a military statement. In fact, 9 of the 18 US soldiers opened fire on the car, raking it with “hundreds of rounds of gunfire” (*New York Times*).

Virtually every word of the original press release on the incident issued June 25 by the Public Affairs Office in “Camp Victory” in Baghdad has proven to be a lie. The statement began, “Soldiers killed three criminals after they attacked them with small arms fire in Baghdad at approximately 8:40 a.m. June 25. ... The criminals, who were traveling in a northerly direction near Baghdad International Airport, fired at the Soldiers.”

It went on: “The Soldiers returned fire, which

resulted in the vehicle running off the road and striking a wall. The vehicle then exploded. All three criminals were killed in the incident. A weapon was recovered from the wreckage.”

Even the description of the car’s exploding was false. As the military now admits, the massive shooting ignited the auto’s engine compartment, and the fire spread throughout the car. Nor was there any weapon in the car. This was invented to cover up the shooting.

The statement continued, “Two MND-B [Multi-National Division—Baghdad] convoy vehicle [sic] received bullet hole damage from the small arms fire. No Soldiers were injured in the attack.” The first sentence is false, another fabrication. It is true that the unarmed bank employees did not injure any US soldiers in the course of coming under lethal attack.

The June 25 statement concluded, “When we are attacked, we will defend ourselves and will use deadly force if necessary,” said Maj. Joey Sullinger, a spokesperson for 4th Brigade Combat Team, 10th Mountain Division. “Such attacks endanger not only U.S. Soldiers but also innocent civilians, including women and children, travelling the roadways of Baghdad.”

The principal danger to innocent civilians in Iraq remains the American occupying force, which has carried out countless murderous rampages.

The military now admits that its June 25 version of events was false. Army Col. Allen W. Batschelet, chief of staff for the 4th Infantry Division, said in an emailed statement that the episode “was an extremely unfortunate and tragic incident. Our deepest regrets of sympathy and condolences go out to the family.”

Regarding the initial army statement and the claims made by the soldiers, a spokesman for the same unit, Lt. Col. Steve Stover, told the media, “We don’t

believe there was any cover-up.” Stover told the media that the soldiers “thought they were in danger, they really did.” He added that the soldiers claimed to have seen gunfire coming from the car. “We now know there were no weapons in the car, and there were not any shell casings.”

The US military reported, according to the *Washington Post*, that its “investigation concluded that neither the soldiers nor the civilians were to blame for the incident.” The soldiers were cleared for their role in the deaths and reported back to duty July 15. The Iraqi Armed Forces general command called the shootings cold-blooded murder.

The family of the murdered bank manager is demanding that the American soldiers be prosecuted, either in the US or Iraq. One of Mahdi’s six children, Mohammed Hafeth, told McClatchy Newspapers that the military’s July 27 statement and apology were inadequate. “Why did they kill him like this?” he said in a telephone interview. “We demand that they send those soldiers to an Iraqi and American court.” The son now bears the responsibility of supporting his family on a \$100-a-month salary at the same bank his father managed.

Mohammed Hafeth told a reporter that the image of his father’s burning vehicle still haunted him. The morning of the incident, he was informed that his father’s car had broken down on the side of the road and went to the spot, unaware there had been a shooting.

According to McClatchy, “As they approached his father’s car he saw the flames. He jumped from the car and started to run toward the burning vehicle, but U.S. soldiers blocked his way.

“‘Go,’ he recalled them ordering. But he said he couldn’t move. He dropped to the ground and wept as his father burned inside the vehicle.”

Mohammed Hafeth claims that the US military offered the family \$10,000, but the family turned down the compensation.

On July 20, according to Iraqi sources, US Special Forces killed the son and nephew of the governor of Salahuddin province, also in ‘cold blood.’ The *Times* reports that American military personnel “broke into a house at 3 a.m. and fatally shot the governor’s 17-year-old son, Hussam. Maj. Muthanna Ibrahim, a spokesman for the governor, said Hussam was shot in his head,

stomach and shoulder while he slept.

“Hussam’s 23-year-old cousin, Uday Khalaf, awoke and tried to push open the door to Hussam’s room, but he was also shot and killed by the American troops, Major Ibrahim said.”

These relatively high-profile episodes reveal the character of the ongoing neo-colonial occupation of Iraq. A study carried out by the British polling agency ORB (Opinion Research Business) concluded in September 2007—and confirmed its findings in January—that more than one million Iraqis had died violent deaths since the March 2003 US invasion.

The killings are also making more difficult the efforts of the Maliki puppet government to come to terms with the US over the details of the long-term occupation of the country. Washington has been demanding that American soldiers be immune from prosecution under Iraqi law.



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