

Leaked video shows US military killing of two Iraqi journalists

Patrick O'Connor
7 April 2010

Leaked US military helicopter video footage, published on the Wikileaks web site on Monday, has shed light on the circumstances of the killing of two Iraqi journalists in July 2007. Reuters' photographer Namir Noor-Eldeen and his assistant Saeed Chmagh were shot dead while on assignment in eastern Baghdad. They were among 10–15 Iraqis killed and badly wounded in the incident, including two young children and other civilians targeted as they attempted to provide assistance to those first attacked. The video footage, with accompanying radio messages among the US troops involved, is further evidence of the criminal character of the US-led invasion and occupation of Iraq.

The US military previously attempted to cover up the incident, challenging Freedom of Information requests made by Reuters. The news agency's demand for an independent investigation was also rejected. An internal military investigation conducted in 2007 exonerated the troops involved in the incident, concluding that the force used was justified and within the rules of engagement.

The leaked video footage was recorded by at least one Apache helicopter. Media outlets have reported that US military officials have acknowledged that the material is genuine. According to Wikileaks, several military whistleblowers provided the web site with encrypted video, which its staff was subsequently able to decrypt. The leak will no doubt further fuel military hostility toward Wikileaks. A March 2008 classified Pentagon report (which was itself leaked to the web site) declared that Wikileaks posed a security threat due to published information potentially being of use to "foreign intelligence and security services, foreign military forces, foreign insurgents, and foreign terrorist groups".

On July 12, 2007, US troops and resistance fighters clashed in Baghdad. Reuters' employees Noor-Eldeen

and Chmagh were investigating when they were seen by US helicopter gunships among a group of about a dozen men, one or two of whom appeared to be carrying rifles. The occupying forces made no attempt to verify whether the men were civilians carrying legally-owned weapons—Iraqi households are allowed to have one registered AK-47 rifle—or establish the identities of the other unarmed men. After radioing a report to their superiors, US gunners received permission to kill everyone in the group.

The incident appeared to be one of several indiscriminate attacks. Ahmad Sahib, an Agence France-Presse photographer who was a few blocks away, has reported: "It looked like the American helicopters were firing against any gathering in the area, because when I got out of my car and started taking pictures, people gathered and an American helicopter fired a few rounds, but they hit the houses nearby and we ran for cover."

Just before the Reuters' journalists and the men they were speaking with were shot, the Apache gunners apparently mistook Namir Noor-Eldeen's camera, which was slung over his shoulder, for a rocket propelled grenade launcher (RPG). After the first burst of gunfire, involving about 300 rounds, the troops congratulate each other: "Oh, yeah, look at those dead bastards... Nice... Good shoot... Thank you."

The video footage then zooms in on Saeed Chmagh, who was badly wounded and slowly crawling to seek assistance. One soldier in the Apache says, "Come on, buddy... All you gotta do is pick up a weapon," hoping to be able to kill him under military rules of engagement.

Shortly after this, a van stops in the area and unarmed Iraqis get out to help Chmagh and the other wounded,

picking them up and trying to move them into their vehicle. It was later reported that the Iraqi driver of the van was a local man who had been taking his children to a tutoring session. After reporting that people were “picking up the bodies,” the Apache gunners received permission to “engage”. Another sustained burst of gunfire followed, killing Chmagh, a man trying to help him, and seriously wounding a boy and girl sitting in the front seat of the vehicle.

When US troops on the ground discover the children, the helicopter gunners respond with indifference. “Well it’s their fault for bringing their kids into a battle,” one says. Another replies: “That’s right.”

After initially ordering the children to be evacuated to a US military hospital for emergency treatment, the troops on the ground were told to hand them over to Iraqi police who were then to take them to a Baghdad hospital. Despite suffering chest and arm bullet wounds, both children survived. Their mother, however, has reportedly received no compensation for the death of her husband or ongoing medical expenses for her children.

After the evacuation of the wounded at the scene of the massacre, one of the troops laughs as he sees a US tank drive over one of the bodies of those initially killed: “I think they just drove over a body... Hey hey! Yeah! ... Maybe it was just a visual illusion, but it looked like it... Well, they’re dead, so...”

Towards the end of the unabridged video footage, the Apaches fire three Hellfire missiles into an apartment complex after reporting that gunfire had been fired from there. Julian Assange, Wikileaks co-founder, told *Democracy Now!*: “We have fresh evidence from Baghdad that there were three families living in that apartment complex, many of whom were killed, including women. And we sent a team down there to collect that evidence... Innocent bystanders walking down the street are also killed in that attack.”

The footage provides a rare first hand glimpse of the military’s recurring war crimes committed in the aftermath of the 2003 invasion. Consistent with all colonial-style wars of occupation, US troops are brutalised, desensitised to violence, and encouraged to regard the local population with racist indifference and hostility.

The US ruling elite regarded the invasion as a means of utilising its military might to take control over a large part of the Middle East’s critical energy resources, thereby gaining an advantage over rival powers in Europe and Asia. From this decision to wage a war of aggression—what was defined by the Nuremberg tribunals as “the supreme international crime”—has followed innumerable atrocities leading to the deaths of an estimated one million Iraqis. The images depicted in the video footage are typical of what was carried out on a daily basis in Iraq and what is now being inflicted on the people of Afghanistan and in the border regions of Pakistan under President Barack Obama’s offensive.

The Iraqi Journalists Union yesterday demanded a criminal investigation into the killing of the Reuters’ employees. “This is another crime added to the crimes of the US forces against Iraqi journalists and civilians,” union leader Mouyyad al-Lami said. “I call upon the government to take a firm stance against the criminals who killed the journalists.”

According to Reporters Without Borders, 221 journalists and media assistants have been killed in Iraq since the 2003 invasion. In many cases there is overwhelming evidence of the US forces deliberately targeting journalists. It does not appear that this was the case in the 2007 killings of the two Reuters’ reporters.

However, senior US military figures subsequently used the incident to warn journalists against attempting to cover the Iraq war independently of the occupying forces’ authority. Responding to questions about Noor-Eldeen and Chmagh’s deaths, Pentagon spokesman Bryan Whitman last year declared: “We think the safest way to cover these operations is to be embedded with US forces.”

The video can be viewed below:



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact