

New revelations on 2005 Haditha massacre in Iraq

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Previously unreported details on the massacre of civilians in the town of Haditha in Anbar province in 2005, one of the most notorious atrocities of the many committed by imperialist forces in Iraq, were revealed in a special report in the *New York Times* on December 15.

Four hundred pages of interrogations of US Marines and their superior officers, part of an official investigation into the massacre that was supposed to be kept secret, were apparently found by a *Times* reporter in a junkyard near Baghdad.

The investigation, led by Maj. Gen. Eldon Bargewell, was also the subject of a report in the *Washington Post* more than four years ago, in April 2007 (see “Haditha massacre report: US commanders see killing Iraqi civilians as ‘cost of doing business’”). The *Post* obtained a copy of this report, and the *Times* account last week adds new details and verbatim testimony from the extensive account that was supposed to have been destroyed in advance of the final withdrawal of US troops from Iraq, but instead wound up discarded and then retrieved.

The internal military inquiry followed the horrific events of November 19, 2005, when a US military vehicle was hit by a roadside bomb. The attack was followed by an orgy of killing by Marines, which left 24 Iraqi civilians dead, including a 76-year-old man as well as children between the ages of 3 and 15.

The details of the testimony, freely given by soldiers as well as their superiors, starkly reveal the essence of the brutal colonial enterprise that was launched with the invasion of Iraq in March 2003. By its very nature, this act of unprovoked aggression, which soon led to the growth of a resistance movement in many parts of the country, demoralized many soldiers and turned others into sadistic killers.

Times account sums up the findings, “The stress of combat left some soldiers paralyzed.... Troops, traumatized by the rising violence and feeling constantly under siege, grew increasingly twitchy, killing more and more civilians in accidental encounters. Others became so desensitized and inured to the killing that they fired on Iraqi civilians deliberately while their fellow soldiers snapped pictures....”

The most brazen and revealing description of the nature of the US mission in Iraq was given, apparently without hesitation or much concern, by Maj. Gen. Steve Johnson, the commander of American forces in Anbar province as a whole. Describing his reaction to the report of civilian deaths in Haditha, Johnson said, “it happened all the time...it was just a cost of doing business on that particular engagement.”

The Haditha massacre took place in the midst of a growing debacle for the US occupation forces that stretched over a number of years. Anbar province was the scene of fierce attacks on occupation forces from shortly after the successful invasion and toppling of Saddam Hussein.

In 2004, four Blackwater contractors were killed and their bodies dragged through the streets of Fallujah, in a scene that became emblematic of the deepening crisis of the occupation. This was followed by the vindictive assault on Fallujah itself by US forces. Anbar province, west of Baghdad, was the site of nearly 30 percent of the US death toll of 4,483 since the start of the war eight years ago.

As the *Times* explains, American forces, many on their second and third tours of duty in the country, were completely unable to tell resistance fighters from noncombatants. As in Vietnam decades earlier, the occupation forces were fighting against an entire

population. Even though the successful invasion and the establishment of the Iraqi occupation was at first assisted by the collaboration of elements within Shiite and Kurdish ruling circles, the hostility among the population as a whole to the occupation was immediate and only deepened over time.

The details of the Haditha inquiry highlight the enormous toll of the eight-year war on the Iraqi population and expose the cynical claims that estimates of 1 million Iraqi civilian deaths is wildly overstated. In the testimony of the US commanders themselves, as well as the experience of the US soldiers, killings of noncombatants was an everyday occurrence.

Many civilians were killed, as the interrogations explain, when they refused to stop their cars at checkpoints, undoubtedly out of fear, confusion or language difficulties. One officer testified, “I had Marines shoot children in cars and deal with the Marines individually one on one about it because they have a hard time dealing with that.”

The Haditha massacre, while not at all unique, became a defining moment in the aftermath of the claims of the Bush administration that its war, launched on the basis of lies about weapons of mass destruction, had concluded in victory. Widespread opposition to the invasion amongst the population in the Europe and the US grew and contributed to the rout of Republican candidates in both the 2006 and 2008 elections in the US.

The real significance of the occupation was further spelled out when none of the Marines charged in connection with the Haditha massacre paid any price. Charges against six were dropped, one was acquitted, and a final case is scheduled to go to trial next year.

How the 400 pages of interrogations surfaced provides another glimpse into the real circumstances surrounding the proclamation of the end of the US war in Iraq. The fact that the classified material was found in a junkyard (the newspaper reports that “an attendant was burning them as fuel to cook a dinner of smoked carp”) recalls the humiliating US retreat from Vietnam more than 35 years ago.

The *Times* reports that a spokesman for the US military in Iraq told the newspaper: “We take any breach of classified information as an extremely serious matter. In this case, the documents are being reviewed to determine whether an investigation is warranted.”



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