

US bombs kill oil workers in Syria

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A US air strike on a Syrian oil refinery near the border with Turkey killed at least 30 people Sunday, many of them oil workers, the Syrian Observatory of Human Rights reported.

The refinery, just northeast of the town of Tel Abayad, was apparently targeted because it had fallen under the control of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), the ostensible target of Washington's latest military intervention in the region.

ISIS has seized control over much of northern and eastern Syria, where much of the country's oil production is concentrated. Prior to its surge into neighboring Iraq last June, ISIS had emerged as one of the main Islamist "rebel" groups backed by Washington and its regional allies in a war for regime change against the government of President Bashar al-Assad.

A spokesman for the US Combined Joint Task Force, which oversees the intervention in Iraq and Syria, responded to an inquiry by the Reuters news agency about those killed at the oil refinery with a boilerplate statement regarding civilian casualties.

"When an allegation of civilian casualties caused by US or coalition forces is determined to be credible, a thorough investigation would be launched to determine the accuracy of the claim and any circumstances surrounding it," he stated. He went on to claim that the US military has engaged in "significant mitigation measures within the targeting process and during the conduct of operations to reduce the potential of civilian casualties and collateral damage."

The Pentagon claims that seven months of US air strikes have killed more than 8,500 ISIS "militants" in Iraq and Syria, while providing no estimate of how many civilians have died, nor any explanation of how it distinguishes accurately between the two.

The ISIS body count was provided by Washington's top military officer, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of

Staff Gen. Martin Dempsey, Monday during a surprise visit to Baghdad.

While touting the impact of the US-led air war the previous day during a visit to a French aircraft carrier in the Persian Gulf (saying that the strikes had to be "very precise" to avoid "additional suffering"), Dempsey voiced the view that "Carpet bombing through Iraq is not the answer."

Rather, he insisted, what is required is "strategic patience" with US efforts to rebuild the US-trained Iraqi army, which collapsed last summer in the face of an ISIS offensive. "Underlying issues" had to be resolved, he added.

Following meetings Monday with Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi and Defense Minister Khalid al-Obeidi, Dempsey made it clear that one of the "underlying issues" of greatest concern to Washington is the Iraqi regime's increasing dependence upon Iran for military support.

"What I'm trying to sort out, actually, is the degree to which the near-term embrace of the assistance they're receiving from Iran is a reaction to the existential threat [posed by ISIS], or whether it is something longer-term," Dempsey told the Associated Press.

Earlier, he voiced concerns that "it's going to be difficult to sustain the coalition" against ISIS, which includes such reactionary Sunni monarchies as Saudi Arabia and Qatar, which have been principal sources of funding for ISIS and other Islamist militias fighting the Iranian-backed regime in Syria.

Iran plays a prominent role in backing a force of some 30,000, composed largely of Iraqi Shiite militias, in an offensive aimed at retaking the predominantly Sunni city of Tikrit, the birthplace of Saddam Hussein, who was overthrown and then executed in the wake of the 2003 US invasion of Iraq. Iranian advisers are helping direct the attack, and Iran has provided artillery

and other direct military support for the offensive, in which US forces are playing no direct role.

The siege of Tikrit is seen as an essential strategic preparation for an assault on Mosul, Iraq's second largest city to the north, which fell to ISIS last summer. Fighting was reported Monday to the north, south and west of the Tikrit.

Among the towns to fall to the pro-Iraqi government forces Sunday was Albu Ajil, where some Sunni tribesmen had been accused of participating in the ISIS massacre of hundreds of predominantly Shiite army recruits from a nearby base. At least one militia commander had cast the Tikrit offensive as an act of revenge, and there were fears of possible sectarian reprisals.

A number of Sunni residents of the area have fled to the city of Samarra to escape the attack. AFP spoke to Abu Alaa, a 50-year-old farmer, who said, "I left my sheep and my cows behind. We did not have any relations with [ISIS], we were oppressed." He recounted that those who fled had been detained and interrogated by Shiite militiamen for a day before being allowed to continue their journey.

While US officials have issued hypocritical warnings about Iranian involvement in the Tikrit offensive exacerbating sectarian divisions, US warplanes and advisers were backing an offensive by Kurdish fighters against ISIS outside of the oil-rich city of Kirkuk, to the north. Kurdish forces took control over the city during the ISIS offensive of last June, after the Iraqi army disintegrated. There are sharp sectarian tensions in Kirkuk, intensified by the struggle for control of its oil resources. The population is divided between Kurds, Arabs, Assyrians and Turkmen.

Dempsey acknowledged that US efforts to retrain the Iraqi army had barely begun. The general, who directed the efforts to train an Iraqi puppet army under the US occupation, indicated that the Pentagon is attempting to purge the Iraqi force of commanders that it does not see as reliable, while acknowledging that there are an inadequate number of recruits for the US to train.

"Militarily, I was clear that there still are some leaders who need to be replaced," he said. "There is still a shortage of recruits. There are still instances where those recruits are not being paid on time, equipped properly."

Dempsey dismissed calls from elements in Congress

to send more US troops to train and "advise" Iraqi forces. "We've got trainers and advisers that are waiting for some of the Iraqi units to show up," he said, referring to the nearly 2,700 US troops already on the ground.



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