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NEWS MIDDLE EAST

Photos confirm US raid child deaths

Al Jazeera has obtained exclusive footage that confirms children were among the victims of a US air raid northwest of Baghdad. Local officials said that the bodies of 17 civilians, including six children and eight women, had been pulled from the debris of two houses in al-Ishaqi.



Local officials said six children were among the dead in the US air strike

The US military had issued a statement on Friday saying that two women were among 20 suspected "al Qaeda terrorists" killed in the operation.

Al Jazeera's footage showed the bodies of men, women and children wrapped in blankets after they had been pulled from the rubble.

The Agence France Presse news agency said it passed its own photographs of the dead children to Lieutenant Colonel Christopher Garver, a US military spokesman, who said: "We've checked with the troops who conducted this operation - there were no children found among the terrorists killed.

"I see nothing in the photos that indicates those children were in the houses that our forces received fire from and subsequently destroyed with the air strike."

Faces unrecognisable

In Aljazeera's pictures angry villagers had gathered around the bodies, several of which were so badly charred that their faces were unrecognisable.

Local residents said that one entire family had been killed.

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"The Americans have done this before but they always deny it," Amer Alwan, the mayor of al-Ishaqi, told Reuters news agency.

"I want the world to know what's happening here."

He also told the AFP news agency: "This is the third crime done by Americans in this area of Ishaqi. All the casualties were innocent women and children and everything they said about them being part of al-Qaeda is a lie."

He told Al Jazeera that he was calling for an international investigation into the attack.

Abdullah Hussain Jabbara, deputy governor of Salah al-Din governorate, told Al Jazeera: "Residents of the two houses [which were bombed] have nothing to do with al-Qaeda network. All the people killed are members of the same family."

Civilians killed

Jabbara said an investigation into the incident would be carried out.

"But what is the use of opening an investigation?" he asked. "The occupation still exists and Iraqi citizens are the victims."

Local officials and Iraqi police had said on Friday that they believed 32 civilians had been killed in the attack.

Troops raided a cluster of buildings in the area around Thar Thar lake on Friday.

The US military said in a statement on Friday the operation in Salaheddin province had been "based on intelligence reports that indicated associates with links to multiple al-Qaeda in Iraq networks were operating in the area".

The statement said troops had come under fire, and "despite efforts to subdue the remaining armed terrorists, coalition forces continued to be threatened by enemy fire, causing forces to call in close air support ... resulting in 18 more armed terrorists killed."

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The US said the dead were 'al Qaeda terrorists'

a safe and peaceful Iraq. Coalition Forces will continue to target not only senior al Qaeda in Iraq leaders, but all terrorists regardless of their titles or positions within the community," the statement said.

Dead women

The US military said AK-47 machine guns, rocket-propelled grenades, anti-personnel mines, explosives, blasting caps and suicide vests were found during the operation.

Garver told AFP news agency on Friday that the dead women would have been confirmed as combatants in a "battle damage assessment" or inspection of the site following the incident.

"If there is a weapon with or next to the person or they are holding it, they are a terrorist," he said.

Only a handful of complaints involving civilian deaths in Iraq have led to criminal investigations by the US military.

"I can promise you that, in every one of these incidents, they will be fully investigated," Lieutenant General Peter Chiarelli, the second-ranking US general in the country, said.

Al Jazeera contacted the US military for further comment following the release of the television footage.

Officials said they had nothing new to add to their earlier comments.

In March, Iraqis accused US forces of shooting 11 people in al-Ishaqi, including four women and five children, while US forces maintained it had only killed two women and a child in an air strike.

The BBC later broadcast video footage from the scene showing people with gunshot wounds. The soldiers involved in the case, however, were cleared of all misconduct.

Source: Al Jazeera and agencies