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Did American Marines murder 23 Iraqi civilians?

The US military deny accusations of massive over-reaction when attacked. But video evidence from one incident has led the official story to unravel. By Raymond Whitaker

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US military investigators are examining allegations that Marines shot unarmed Iraqis, then claimed they were "enemy fighters", The Independent on Sunday has learned. In the same incident, eyewitnesses say, one man bled to death over a period of hours as soldiers ignored his pleas for help.

American military officials in Iraq have already admitted that 15 civilians who died in the incident in the western town of Haditha last November were killed by Marines, and not by a roadside bomb, as had previously been claimed. The only victim of the remotely triggered bomb, it is now conceded, was a 20-year-old Marine, Lance-Corporal Miguel Terrazas, from El Paso, Texas.

An inquiry has been launched by the US Navy's Criminal Investigation Service after the military was presented with evidence that the 15 civilians, including seven women and three children still in their nightclothes, had been killed in their homes in the wake of the bombing. If it is proved that they died in a rampage by the Marines, and not as a result of "collateral damage", it would rank as the worst case of deliberate killing of Iraqi civilians by US armed forces since the invasion three years ago.

The military still insists that eight men who also died on 19 November were insurgents who opened fire on a Marines patrol after the bomb explosion. One military spokeswoman said the civilian deaths were their fault, because they "placed noncombatants in the line of fire as the Marines responded to defend themselves". But numerous witnesses say the only shooting was by the Marines, and that the only difference between these victims and the rest were that they were young men who could be depicted as insurgents. Despite claims of a fierce firefight after the explosion, military officials say two AK-47 rifles were the only weapons recovered.

Four of the young men who died were students on their way to college. They were in a car which was near the Marines' convoy when the bomb went off. According to the soldiers' statements to investigators, they told the youths to leave the car and lie face down in the road. Instead they ran, and were shot down. All this time, the Marines said, they were under fire from nearby houses.

The IoS understands, however, that local people have contradicted this account in almost every detail. According to their statements, the soldiers were not under fire when they approached the car. Rather than order the occupants to leave the vehicle and lie down, they simply dragged them out and shot them. While investigators seek to determine the truth of the incident, the military has admitted no weapons were found in the vehicle.

The most shocking allegation concerns what happened when the Marines approached a house nearby. Although investigators are again struggling to reconcile wildly differing accounts, the military confirms that seven people were killed inside the house, including two women and a child. The Marines also reported seeing a man and a woman run out of the house, at which they gave chase and shot and killed the man. Relatives named the woman as Hiba Abdullah, and said she escaped with her baby. The dead man, they added, was her husband, Rashid.

But according to statements seen by the investigators, the first time the Marines saw the couple was not when they were running away. Instead they confronted them in or near the house. Hiba Abdullah, who spoke some English, asked if she could flee, and the soldiers let her run away. Her husband, after a moment of hesitation, ran after her and was shot in the chest.

Rather than dying immediately, local people have told investigators, Rashid lay bleeding for hours, pleading for help, but the Marines, who had cordoned off the area, refused to allow anyone access to him.

The other four men claimed to be insurgents were all the sons of a man called Ahmed Ayed. The Marines say that when they entered a house, one of the brothers had an AK-47 and another appeared to be reaching into a wardrobe for a weapon. The soldiers opened fire, killing all four. But another member of the family said the brothers had all been forced into the wardrobe and killed there.

Last November the first report of the incident, in a communique from the Marines, said Lance-Corporal Terrazas and "15 Iraqi civilians were killed yesterday from the blast of a roadside bomb". Gunmen "attacked the convoy with small-arms fire", the statement added, and the Marines returned fire, killing eight insurgents and wounding one.

Although the mayor of Haditha led a protest delegation to the local Marines camp soon afterwards, the official story did not begin to unravel until an Iraqi human rights group obtained a video, shot by a local journalism student, which showed that the civilians could not have been killed by a bomb. It also showed that although the houses where they died were bullet-riddled indoors, there were no exterior marks, casting doubt on the Marines' claims of a firefight.

After Time magazine took up the story, an infantry colonel was sent to Haditha for an inquiry which concluded that the civilians died as a result of the Marines' actions rather than the bombing. But the colonel did not accuse the Marines of wrongdoing, saying the deaths were "collateral damage". Nor was there a challenge to the claim that the others were insurgents; it is not known whether the criminal inquiry now in progress will reopen the issue.

US troops are frequently accused of massive over-reaction when attacked, even allowing for the stress of combat. According to human rights groups, the only unusual feature of the events of 19 November was that there was video evidence to contradict the military account.

Almost the only other instance was an air attack in May 2004 on what the US military described as a gathering of "foreign fighters" and local people said was a wedding party. Their version was backed up by a video showing dead children and smashed musical instruments. When asked to account for the footage, the response of the authorities was to demand the name of the cameraman who shot it. An aggressive response to accusations of misconduct is common. Last week Iraqi journalists filmed the bodies of five children, four women and two men whom local police said had been killed in their home in Ishaqi, north of Baghdad. A spokesman, Lt-Col Barry Johnson, said coalition forces knew of four people killed in crossfire but denied claims that officers had failed to attend a meeting with local people.

"There appears to be a distinct pattern of misinformation," complained Lt-Col Johnson. "This is another clear sign of that happening, making allegations for the sake of prompting media reporting and attempting to discredit coalition operations. This is a pattern we've seen the terrorist-backed insurgency use repeatedly."

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