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Iraq Sunnis accuse US of "atrocities" over raids

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BAGHDAD, May 15 (Reuters) - Iraq's main Sunni religious grouping accused U.S. forces on Monday of killing 25 civilians in raids near Baghdad in the past two days, rejecting the U.S. account that only suspected insurgents had died.

"We hold the Iraqi government and the occupiers responsible for this brutal atrocity," the Muslim Clerics Association said in a statement.

The U.S. military earlier on Monday said its forces had killed more than 41 insurgents in and around the villages of Latifiya and Yusifiya, south of the capital, on Saturday and Sunday. It also said a U.S. helicopter was shot down, killing two soldiers.

Two separate U.S. statements on the air and ground raids did not mention any civilian deaths, but said several women and children were wounded.

The U.S. military says al Qaeda's leader in Iraq, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, uses the area as a staging ground for suicide attacks in Baghdad. It says he aims to incite a sectarian civil war between majority Shi'ites and minority Sunnis.

The Sunni association accused U.S. forces of attacking civilian houses and killing people as they tried to flee.

It said 25 people were killed in Latifiya, 40 km (25 miles) south of Baghdad, on Saturday and Sunday. The U.S. military had said 15 "suspected terrorists" were killed in Latifiya and more than 25 in raids on Sunday in nearby Yusifiya.

"American and Iraqi forces on Saturday evening carried out a severe air strike in the area of Latifiya against houses with civilians," the statement said.

It said people ran away from their houses to seek protection but that U.S. forces followed them and killed them.

U.S. troops detained six people, including two women and a child, and returned on Monday and seized more people, it said. The military said it had detained eight suspects in Latifiya.

The area south of the capital, sometimes popularly called the "triangle of death", has been a stronghold of the Sunni Arab insurgency raging against U.S. and Iraqi forces.

Iraq's minority Sunnis dominated the country under Saddam Hussein but have seen their influence wane since he was overthrown by U.S. forces in 2003.

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