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May 19, 2004

U.S. Reportedly Kills 40 Iraqis at Wedding Party

Associated Press

A U.S. helicopter fired on a wedding party in the remote desert near the border with Syria, killing more than 40 people, most of them women and children, Iraqi officials said. The U.S. military said it was investigating.

By SCHEHEREZADE FARAMARZI, Associated Press Writer

BAGHDAD, Iraq - A U.S. helicopter fired on a wedding party in the remote desert near the border with Syria, killing more than 40 people, most of them women and children, Iraqi officials said. The U.S. military said it was investigating.

Associated Press Television News footage showed a truck containing bloodied bodies, many wrapped in blankets, piled one atop the other. Several were children, one of whom had been decapitated.

The attack occurred about 2:45 a.m. in a desert region near the border with Syria and Jordan, according to Lt. Col. Ziyad al-Jbouri, deputy police chief of Ramadi, the provincial capital about 250 miles to the east. He said between 42 and 45 people died, including 15 children and 10 women. Dr. Salah al-Ani, who works at a hospital in Ramadi, put the death toll at 45.

The area, a desolate region populated only by shepherds, is popular with smugglers, including weapons smugglers, and the U.S. military suspects militants use it as a route to slip in from Syria to fight the Americans. It is under constant surveillance by American forces.

Iraqis interviewed on the videotape said revelers had fired volleys of gunfire into the air in a traditional wedding celebration before the attack took place. American troops have sometimes mistaken celebratory gunfire for hostile fire.

Lt. Col. Dan Williams, a U.S. military spokesman, said the military was investigating.

"I cannot comment on this because we have not received any reports from our units that this has happened nor that any were involved in such a tragedy," Williams wrote in an e-mail in response to a question from The Associated Press.

"We take all these requests seriously and we have forwarded this inquiry to the Joint Operations Center for further review and any other information that may be available," Williams said.

The video footage showed mourners with shovels digging graves over a wide dusty area in Ramadi, the provincial capital where the bodies had been taken to obtain death certificates. A group of men crouched and wept around one coffin.

Al-Ani, the doctor, said people at the wedding fired weapons in the air, and that American troops came to investigate and left. However, al-Ani said, helicopters later arrived and attacked the area. Two houses were destroyed, he said.

"This was a wedding and the (U.S.) planes came and attacked the people at a house. Is this the democracy and freedom that (President) Bush has brought us?" said a man on the videotape, Dahham Harraj. "There was no reason."

Another man shown on the tape, who refused to give his name, said the victims were at a wedding party "and the U.S. military planes came... and started killing everyone in the house."

In July 2002, Afghan officials said 48 civilians at a wedding party were killed and 117 wounded by a U.S. airstrike in Afghanistan (news - web sites)'s Uruzgan province. An investigative report released by the U.S. Central Command said the airstrike was justified because American planes had come under fire.

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