

Iraq: Death in Fallujah rising, doctors say

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FALLUJAH, 4 January (IRIN) - "It was really distressing picking up dead bodies from destroyed homes, especially children. It is the most depressing situation I have ever been in since the war started," Dr Rafa'ah al-Iyssaue, director of the main hospital in Fallujah city, some 60 km west of Baghdad, told IRIN.

According to al-Iyssaue, the hospital emergency team has recovered more than 700 bodies from rubble where houses and shops once stood, adding that more than 550 were women and children. He said a very small number of men were found in these places and most were elderly.

Doctors at the hospital claim that many bodies had been found in a mutilated condition, some without legs or arms. Two babies were found at their homes, who are believed to have died from malnutrition, according to a specialist at the hospital.

Al-Iyssaue added these numbers were only from nine neighbourhoods of the city and that 18 others had not yet been reached, as they were waiting for help from the Iraqi Red Crescent Society (IRCS) to make it easier for them to enter.

He explained that many of the dead had been already buried by civilians from the Garma and Amirya districts of Fallujah after approval from US-led forces nearly three weeks ago, and those bodies had not been counted.

IRCS officials told IRIN they needed more time to give an accurate death toll, adding that the city was completely uninhabitable.

Ministry of Health officials told IRIN that they are in the process of investigating the number of deaths, but claim that a very small number of women and children were killed, contrary to what doctors in Fallujah have said. They added that they are working together with the US-led forces to rehabilitate the health system inside the city.

Residents who have returned to their homes after waiting hours to enter the city found that most of their homes had been totally destroyed by the fighting which started nearly a month ago between the US-led forces and insurgents who are said to be under the control of Abu-Mussab al-Zarqawi, a Jordanian terrorist wanted by the Iraqi government.

"I've been here for more than six hours and until now could not enter the city, even after the fighting finished in our area. There is no respect for civilians," Samirah al-Jumaili, a mother of seven, told IRIN.

The situation in Fallujah is still not clear. According to Col. Clark Mathew, spokesman for the US Marines, night time attacks continue in some areas of the city. US forces have informed residents not to leave their homes after the imposed curfew of 1800 to 0600.

Mathew explained that most attacks were in areas where US troops have bases in order to secure the city, but added that by the end of this month the situation should be under control and that the reconstruction of Fallujah would then begin. "We hope that very soon reconstruction of Fallujah will start and families will feel a new life," Mathew added.

"The US troops are saying that soon Fallujah will be rebuilt. I believe that this city won't offer a minimum of living conditions until another year has passed. I am still searching for what they have been calling democracy," Muhammad Kubaissy, a civilian from Fallujah, told IRIN. His home and two shops were destroyed in the fighting.

"They came to bring us freedom, but all Iraqis are now prisoners in their own homes," he added.

"It is impossible to live in Fallujah. There is no water, electricity or sewage treatment. Even hospitals cannot afford the minimum of security for all families of the city. We don't have enough medicine and you can feel the bad smell of bodies in the air," al-lyssaue added.

Residents of Fallujah have been asking the Iraqi government to allow journalists and TV reporters to enter the city in order to show the reality.

The government will only allow journalists to visit with a special identity card, saying it is for their own safety. Many journalists have been turned away from Fallujah after not receiving authorisation from US-troops guarding the city.

"We need someone here to show the reality of Fallujah. Even when some journalists are here they are being followed by the Marines. We need someone to help us. The world should see the real picture of Fallujah," Sheikh Abbas al-Zubeiny told IRIN.

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