

Iraq: Fewer Deaths Bring No Reassurance

By [Ali Al-Fadhily](#)

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BAGHDAD, Nov 9 (IPS) - Despite claims by Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki and Bush administration officials that violence in Iraq is decreasing, residents in the capital tell a different story.

Attacks by Iraqi resistance groups against the U.S. military continue in Baghdad and Iraq's al-Anbar province, despite U.S. military support for certain Sunni militias in the areas.

According to the U.S. Department of Defence, 18 U.S. soldiers were killed in Baghdad and al-Anbar in October. In all 39 U.S. soldiers were reported killed in Iraq for the month, making it the lowest monthly total since March 2006.

Despite the relatively low October numbers, 2007 is on pace to be the deadliest year on record for U.S. troops since the invasion of March 2003. At least 847 U.S. military personnel have been reported killed this year in Iraq, making it the second highest toll yet.

The deadliest year was 2004, when 849 U.S. military members were killed.

But many Iraqis say that violence elsewhere continues unreported - and that where there is calm, it is hardly for reassuring reasons.

"Sectarian killings are less because all the Sunnis have been evicted from mixed areas in Baghdad," Salman Hameed, a teacher who was evicted from the al-Hurriya area west of Baghdad eight months ago told IPS. "All my relatives and Sunni neighbours who survived the killing campaign led by the militias under the eyes of American and Iraqi forces have fled either to Syria or to other Sunni cities."

On Nov. 5 Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki declared victory during a rare walkabout in Baghdad as night fell. "We have achieved victory against terrorist groups and militias," Maliki told reporters. "Things will not return to the way they were."

Many Iraqis feel that the reason for the relative calm is that many people have either fled, or been killed.

"There is no one left for them to kill," 55-year-old retired teacher Nathum Taha told IPS in Baghdad. "The Americans continue to use Arab Shia Iraqi militias to kill Sunnis, but most people have left by now."

Others blamed the media for lack of adequate reportage.

"Attacks against U.S. forces are not much less than they were last month, but media

coverage has almost disappeared,” Muhammad Younis from Mosul, in Baghdad on a business trip, told IPS. “The resistance is moving fast and changing locations in order to avoid intelligence provided by collaborators. Most Iraqis hate the Americans more than ever after the death and destruction caused by their occupation.”

There was a reported five-fold increase in the number of bombs dropped on Iraq during the first six months of 2007 compared to the same period in 2006. Over 30 tonnes of these were cluster weapons, which take a particularly heavy toll on civilians.

“American air raids are increasing in a way that shows a total failure on the ground,” a retired general of the dissolved Iraqi army told IPS. “A whole family was killed near Madayin, southeast Baghdad on Saturday (Nov. 3) just after the tragic bombing of houses south of Tikrit (about 100 km north of Baghdad) where more than 10 civilians were killed.”

On Nov. 4, Iraqi army personnel backed by U.S. soldiers detained 12 people during a raid on the Sunni Abu Hanifa mosque in the Adhamiyah district of northern Baghdad.

“Those American and government forces could not face the resistance fighters, so they arrest innocent people,” Aziz Thafir, a lawyer who witnessed the arrests, told IPS. “They started their raid with nasty sectarian words against Sunnis, and then arrested every one who was around in the mosque.”

Sectarian violence, which many Iraqis believe to be backed by the U.S., continues at many places where there are still mixed communities left.

In Duluiya, 150 km north of Baghdad, a U.S. army unit raided a house last week and killed a young man inside. Witnesses who arrived in Baghdad from the Sunni town complained that the media is not covering either the resistance activity there or the regular “crimes” committed by U.S. and Iraqi government forces against innocent civilians.

“They are more vicious than they were before,” 44-year-old Abu Ahmed told IPS in the capital. “This is a religious war against Sunnis, who would not accept the occupation and division of the country.”

Ali al-Fadhily is IPS correspondent in Baghdad; he works in close collaboration with Dahr Jamail, IPS U.S.-based specialist writer on Iraq who travels extensively in the region.

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