

IRAQ; Locals Accuse U.S. of Massacre in Ramadi

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RAMADI, Nov 17 (IPS) – U.S. military tank fire killed scores of civilians in Ramadi, capital of Al-Anbar province, late Monday night, according to witnesses and doctors. Anger and frustration were evident at the hospitals and during the funerals in the following days.

Iraqi doctors and witnesses at the scene of the attack said U.S. tanks killed 35 civilians when they shelled several homes in the Al-Dhubat area of the city.

Ramadi, located 110 km west of Baghdad, has been beset with sporadic but intense violence between occupation forces and insurgents for several months.

On Tuesday, hundreds of people carried the 35 coffins of the dead to a graveyard in a funeral procession which closely resembled an angry demonstration.

“We heard the bombing and we thought it was the usual fighting between resistance fighters and the Americans, but we soon realised it was bombing by large cannons,” 60-year-old Haji Jassim explained to IPS at the burial. “We weren’t allowed by the Americans to reach the destroyed houses to try to rescue those who were buried, so certainly many of them bled to death.”

Jassim claimed that everyone killed was innocent, that they were not fighters. He said that when he and others attempted to reach the rubble of the destroyed homes, located near mosques whose minaret’s loudspeakers had broadcast pleas for help, “There was a big American force that stopped us and told us the usual ugly phrases we hear from them every day.”

Jassim, speaking with IPS while several other witnesses listened while nodding their heads, said that ambulances did not appear on the scene for hours because “we realised that the Americans did not allow them to move,” and that as a result, “there were people buried under the rubble who were bleeding to death while there was still a chance to rescue them.”

Jassim then burst into tears and walked away saying prayers to Allah to bless the souls of the dead.

A doctor at Ramadi’s main hospital, Abdullah Salih, told reporters that 35 bodies had been brought in and he also believed that others had not been retrieved since access had been limited by ongoing U.S. military operations.

Another doctor, Kamal al-Ani, said that in addition to the dead, another 17 wounded had been brought into the hospital.

The scene at the hospital was tragic as doctors confirmed the reason of death for many as severe bleeding that had gone on for several hours. Most of the doctors were unwilling to discuss too many details for fear of U.S. military reprisals.

“You can notice the number of dead is at least twice as high as the number of wounded,” one of the doctors, speaking on condition of anonymity, told IPS. A local Iraqi policeman who identified himself as Khalif Obeidi told IPS that tanks had destroyed several houses in the area during the U.S. raid, killing more than 30 civilians.

“We know that those killed were innocent,” said Obeidi, “although there have been attacks on the Americans from near that area in the past.”

Residents of the city and relatives of the dead who were at the funeral were furious.

“There is no other way for the Sunnis than to fight,” Ali Khudher, a 25-year-old carpenter who lost a relative in the attack told IPS. “It is a religious war and no one can deny that now.”

Others who attended the mass funeral chanted anti-American, anti-Israeli, anti-Iranian and even slogans against the Islamic Party which is now part of the Iraqi government.

Tempers run high in Ramadi also because the city has often been the scene of large-scale U.S. military operations and their inherent forms of collective punishment. Last June, thousands of residents were forced from their homes due to military operations, according to Maurizio Mascia, programme manager for the Italian Consortium of Solidarity (ICS), a non-governmental group based in Amman, Jordan that provides relief to refugees in Iraq.

At that time, Mascia told IPS, “The Americans, instead of attacking the city all at once like they’ve done in their previous operations in cities like Fallujah and Al-Qa’im, are using helicopters and ground troops to attack one district at a time in Ramadi.”

Mirroring a complaint heard often from residents of Ramadi, Mascia said, “The main dangers for the population are the MNF (multi-national force) at the checkpoints and the snipers: both usually shoot at any movement that they consider dangerous — causing many victims among civilians.”

In a phone conversation with IPS, a spokesman for the U.S. military in Baghdad said he had no specific details of the incident and that “the U.S. military has been conducting ongoing patrols and security details in Al-Anbar for months now. Our efforts are always to attack the terrorists and protect the civilian population.”

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