

IRAQ: Terrified Soldiers Terrifying People

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FALLUJAH, Iraq, Jan 8 (IPS) – Ten-year-old Yassir aimed a plastic gun at a passing U.S. armoured patrol in Fallujah, and shouted “Bang! Bang!”

Yassir did not know what was coming. “I yelled for everyone to run, because the Americans were turning back,” 12-year-old Ahmed who was with Yassir told IPS.

The soldiers followed Yassir to his house and smashed almost everything in it. “They did this after beating Yassir and his uncle hard, and they spoke the nastiest words,” Ahmed said.

It is not just the children, or the people of Fallujah who are frightened.

“Those soldiers are terrified here,” Dr. Salim al-Dyni, a psychotherapist visiting Fallujah told IPS. Dr Dyni said he had seen professional reports of psychologically disturbed soldiers “while serving in hot areas, and Fallujah is the hottest and most terrifying for them.”

Dr. Dyni said disturbed soldiers were behind the worst atrocities. “Most murders committed by U.S. soldiers resulted from the soldiers’ fears.”

Local Iraqi police estimate that at least five attacks are being carried out against U.S. troops in Fallujah each day, and about as many against Iraqi government security forces. The city in the restive al-Anabar province to the west of Baghdad has been under some form of siege since April 2004.

That has meant punishment for the people. “American officers asked me a hundred times how the fighters obtain weapons,” a 35-year-old resident who was detained together with dozens of others during a U.S. military raid at their houses in the Muallimin Quarter last month told IPS.

“They (American soldiers) called me the worst of names that I could understand, and many that I could not. I heard younger detainees screaming under torture repeating ‘I do not know, I do not know’, apparently replying to the same question I was asked.”

U.S. soldiers have been reacting wildly to attacks on them.

Several areas of Fallujah recently went without electricity for two weeks after U.S. soldiers attacked the power station following a sniper attack.

Thubbat, Muhandiseen, Muallimeen, Jughaifi and most western parts of the city were affected. “They are punishing civilians for their failure to protect themselves,” a resident of

Thubbat quarter told IPS. "I defy them to capture a single sniper who kills their soldiers."

Many of those killed in the ongoing violence are civilians. The biggest local complaint is that U.S. forces attack civilians at random in revenge for colleagues killed in attacks by the resistance.

More than 5,000 civilians killed by U.S. soldiers have been buried in Fallujah cemeteries and mass graves dug on the outskirts of the city, according to the Study Centre for Human Rights and Democracy, a non-governmental organisation based in Fallujah.

"At least half the deceased are women, children and elderly people," group co-director Mohamad Tareq al-Deraji told IPS.

Overstretched U.S. soldiers appear to be punishing civilians while suffering from some form of post-traumatic stress disorder. IPS reported Jan. 3 that new guidelines released by the Pentagon last month allow commanders now to re-deploy soldiers suffering from such disorders.

According to the U.S. military newspaper Stars and Stripes, service members with "a psychiatric disorder in remission, or whose residual symptoms do not impair duty performance" may be considered for duty downrange. It lists post-traumatic stress disorder as a "treatable" problem.

Steve Robinson, director of Veterans Affairs for Veterans for America told IPS correspondent Aaron Glantz that "as a layman and a former soldier I think that's ridiculous."

"If I've got a soldier who's on Ambien to go to sleep and Seroquel and Qanapin and all kinds of other psychotropic meds, I don't want them to have a weapon in their hand and to be part of my team because they're a risk to themselves and to others," he said. "But apparently, the military has its own view of how well a soldier can function under those conditions, and is gambling that they can be successful."

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