

U.S. Military ‘Obstructing’ Medical Care in Iraq

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The U.S. military has been preventing delivery of medical care in several instances, medical staff say.

Iraqi doctors at many hospitals have reported raids by coalition forces. Some of the more recent raids have been in Amiriyat al-Fallujah, about 10km to the east of Fallujah, the town to which U.S. forces have laid bloody siege. Amiriyat al-Fallujah has been the source of several reported resistance attacks on U.S. forces.

The main hospital in Amiriyat al-Fallujah was raided twice recently by U.S. soldiers and members of the Iraqi National Guard, doctors say. The first time was November 29 at 5:40am, and the second time was the following day, said a doctor at the hospital who did not want to give his real name for fear of U.S. reprisals.

In the first raid about 150 U.S. soldiers and at least 40 members of the Iraqi National Guard stormed the small hospital, he said.

They were yelling loudly at everyone, both doctors and patients alike, the young doctor said. They divided into groups and were all over the hospital. They broke the gates outside, they broke the doors of the garage, and they raided our supply room where our food and supplies are. They broke all the interior doors of the hospital, as well as every exterior door.

He was then interrogated about resistance fighters, he said. The Americans threatened to do here what they did in Fallujah if I didn't cooperate with them, he said.

Another doctor, speaking on condition of anonymity, said that all of the doors of the clinics inside the hospital were kicked in. All of the doctors, along with the security guard were handcuffed and interrogated for several hours, he said.

The two doctors pointed to an ambulance with a shattered back window. When the Americans raided our hospital again last Tuesday at 7pm, they smashed one of our ambulances, the first doctor said.

His colleague pointed to other bullet-riddled ambulances. The Americans have snipers all along the road between here and Fallujah, he said. They are shooting our ambulances if they try to go to Fallujah.

In nearby Saqlawiyah, Dr Abdulla Aziz told Inter Press Service (IPS) that occupation forces had blocked any medical supplies from entering or leaving the city. They won't let any of our ambulances go to help Fallujah, he said. We are out of supplies and they won't let anyone bring us more.

The pattern of military interference in medical work has apparently persisted for many months. During the April siege of Fallujah, doctors there reported similar difficulties.

The marines have said they didn't close the hospital, but essentially they did, said Dr. Abdul Jabbar, orthopedic surgeon at Fallujah General Hospital. They closed the bridge which connects us to the city, and closed our road. The area in front of our hospital was full of their soldiers and vehicles.

This prevented medical care reaching countless patients in desperate need, he said. Who knows how many of them died that we could have saved.

He too said the military had fired on civilian ambulances. They had also fired at the clinic he had been working in since April, he said. Some days we couldn't leave, or even go near the door because of the snipers. They were shooting at the front door of the clinic.

Dr. Jabbar said U.S. snipers shot and killed one of the ambulance drivers of the clinic where he worked during the fighting.

We were tied up and beaten despite being unarmed and having only our medical instruments, Asma Khamis al-Muhannadi, a doctor who was present during the U.S. and Iraqi National Guard raid on Fallujah General Hospital told reporters later.

She said troops dragged patients from their beds and pushed them against the wall.. I was with a woman in labor, the umbilical cord had not yet been cut, she said. At that time, a U.S. soldier shouted at one of the (Iraqi) national guards to arrest me and tie my hands while I was helping the mother to deliver.

Other doctors spoke of their experience of the raid. The Americans shot out the lights in the front of our hospital, they prevented doctors from reaching the emergency unit at the hospital, and we quickly began to run out of supplies and much needed medication, said Dr. Ahmed, who gave only a first name. U.S. troops prevented doctors from entering the hospital on several occasions, he said.

Targeting hospitals or ambulances is in direct contravention of the Fourth Geneva Convention, which strictly forbids attacks on emergency vehicles and the impeding of medical operations during war.

At several places doctors said U.S. troops had demanded information from medical staff about resistance fighters. They are always coming here and asking us if we have injured fighters, a doctor at a hospital said.

A U.S. military spokesman in Baghdad told IPS that routine searches of hospitals are carried out to look for insurgents. He said it has never been the policy of coalition forces to impede medical services in Iraq.

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