

U.S. Military Resorting To Collective Punishment

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BAGHDAD, Jan 18 (IPS) - The U.S. military is resorting to collective punishment tactics in Iraq similar to those used by Israeli troops in the occupied territories of Palestine, residents say.

Military bulldozers have mown down palm groves in the rural al-Dora farming area on the outskirts of Baghdad, residents say. Electricity has been cut, the local fuel station destroyed and the access road blocked.

The U.S. action comes after resistance fighters attacked soldiers from this area several weeks back.

"The Americans were attacked from this field, then they returned and started cutting down all the trees," says Kareem, a local mechanic, pointing to a pile of burnt date palms in a bulldozed field. "None of us knows any fighters, we all know they are coming here from other areas to attack the Americans, but we are the people who suffer from this."

The military action follows a similar round of attacks and retaliation earlier this month.

U.S. Army Brigadier-General Mark Kimmit told reporters then that the military had launched 'Operation Iron Grip' in the area to send "a very clear message to anybody who thinks that they can run around Baghdad without worrying about the consequences of firing RPGs (rocket propelled grenades), firing mortars."

Gen. Kimmit said "there is a capability in the air that can quickly respond against anybody who would want to harm Iraqi citizens or coalition forces." Then as now, local people denied any knowledge of harbouring resistance fighters.

And now, as then, they say they have to pay the price.

"They destroyed our fences, and now there are wolves attacking our animals," said Mohammed, a schoolboy. "They destroyed much of our farming equipment, and the worst is they cut our electricity. They come by here every night and fire their weapons to frighten us."

People need electricity to run pumps to irrigate the farms, he said. "Now we are carrying water in buckets from the river, and this is very difficult for us," Mohammed said. "They say they are going to make things better for us, but they are worse."

Going into fields littered with unexploded mortar shells after the U.S. retaliation has become

hazardous now. "We asked them the first time and they said okay, we'll come take care of it," said a farmer who called himself Sharkr. "But they never came."

Other residents say soldiers beat them up during random home raids. "I was beaten by the Americans," said Ihsan, a 17 year-old secondary school student. "They asked me who attacked them, but I do not know. My home was raided, our furniture destroyed, and one of my uncles was arrested."

People in Abu Hishma village in the area spoke of similar experiences earlier. After U.S. soldiers were attacked, the entire village was encircled with razor wire. Residents were forced to acquire military identity badges and enter through a military controlled checkpoint.

The main farm road was blocked by four large concrete slabs after attacks several weeks ago. Residents used tractors to remove the blocks, but last week they say the military installed four larger blocks.

"They humiliate us when we talk to them," said Hamoud Abid, a 50-year-old farmer. "They would not tell us when they will remove these blocks, so we are all walking now."

A military spokesperson in Baghdad declined to comment on the statements by the people in al-Dora, and declined a request for his name. But he said there were ongoing security operations in al-Dora.

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