

Fury in Fallujah after US air strikes

By James Conachy
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The US military carried out its second air strike in four days on residential areas in south central Fallujah yesterday. According to witnesses interviewed by Agence France Presse and other agencies, missiles fired from jet fighters slammed into a mechanics' garage at 10:30 p.m. The mechanic, Abu Fares, was killed, as were his two sons. The Fallujah hospital informed the press that at least 10 other people were injured.

Yesterday's attack follows the devastating air strike on Saturday, which claimed the lives of 22 members of an extended family, including at least three women and five children. Missiles fired from F-16 jet fighters reduced their house and a neighboring home to rubble. As many as 30 other people were wounded.

A Fallujah doctor, Fadhil al-Badrani, told the British *Observer* that the house belonged to Mohammed Hamadi, a 65-year-old farmer. "The whole family is gone. The blast was so powerful it blew them to pieces. We could only recognize the women by their long hair."

Witnesses also claim the American pilots delayed firing a second missile into the house until people had begun desperately digging in the rubble for survivors. Wissam Ali Hamad told Al Jazeera, "The number of casualties is so high because after the first missile we jumped to rescue the victims. The second missile killed those trying to carry out the rescue."

The US military claims that both yesterday's and Saturday's attacks were against "safe houses" being used by Tawhid wa al-Jihad—an alleged Islamic extremist group headed by Abu Musaab al-Zarqawi.

The US justification, however, was rejected over the weekend by the Fallujah police and witnesses.

The Fallujah police chief, Colonel Sadr al-Janabi, told Al Jazeera, "This was an attack on a family in a house and it killed all of them. There are no signs that people like Zarqawi were in the house or in Fallujah."

A police captain, Mohammed Abdul Karim, told Agence France Presse, "We have not found any evidence of an armed group there."

The Fallujah Brigade—the paramilitary force—was not consulted about the American intelligence accusations that the house was being used by terrorists and not even notified that an air strike was going to take place. General Mohammed Abid Dulaimi told the *Los Angeles Times*, "We were supposed to be consulted. We would have been able to uncover any suspicions in this respect and would have done our security duties."

The Pentagon has admitted the attack was ordered with the full knowledge it would inflict substantial civilian casualties. A statement issued in the name of US spokesman Brigadier General Mark Kimmitt coldly declared: "It is standard operating procedure to conduct a detailed collateral damage estimate prior to approval of this type of mission. The collateral damage estimate was within permissible limits and this operation was within standing rules of engagement."

A sentiment is developing in Iraq and internationally that the alleged terrorist network of Zarqawi is being used as a bogey-man to justify ongoing US military actions in Iraq.

Thousands of Iraqis demonstrated in Fallujah on Monday and Tuesday to condemn the air strikes and accuse the US of trying to provoke conflict. One of the banners carried at the demonstration on Monday read: "The lie about Zarqawi is like the one about weapons of mass destruction." A Fallujah leader, Shaikh Abd Allah al-Janabi, told Al Jazeera the US occupation forces were conducting a "dirty tricks campaign".

The most likely explanation for the US air strikes is that they are intended to provoke retaliation attacks on American troops by resistance groups in Fallujah and thereby provide the US military with an excuse for once again going into the city in force.

The *Washington Post* reported that last Friday, just

24 hours before the first strike, an unnamed “senior US military commander” was called before Deputy Defense Secretary Paul Wolfowitz to brief him on the situation in Fallujah. The commander told the *Post* that on at least three or four occasions the US military has been on the verge of “pulling the plug” on the deal with the Iraqi generals.

A senior official accompanying Wolfowitz on his trip to Iraq told the *Post*: “The Fallujah Brigade was a band-aid to create a cease-fire. It has to be seen as a temporary fix.”

There is growing criticism of the Bush administration over the state of affairs in Fallujah. After issuing repeated declarations the US military would “pacify” the city and hunt down the men who killed four American mercenaries on March 30, the White House sanctioned a compromise deal that has left it effectively outside the authority of the US occupation.

Anthony Zinni, a former US military commander and a critic of the Bush administration’s conduct of the war, declared in a recent speech: “In this part of the world [the Middle East], strength matters. And if you say you are going to go in and wipe them out, you better do it.”

The *New York Times* and *Washington Post* have both published extensive on-the-spot reports that the resistance groups that held Fallujah against an assault by US marines in April are still in control in the city. The reports have accused the Fallujah Brigade, which recruited a number of the insurgents into its ranks, of making no attempt to disarm them.

The discussion in US ruling circles about a possible end to the cease-fire in Fallujah coincides with another increase in US forces in the country. Some 2,200 Marines have already left their home base in San Diego for Iraq, with a total of 5,000 fresh marines being rushed to the country by August. The overall number of US troops in Iraq is being temporarily increased from 138,000 to 145,000.

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