

14 US soldiers killed in Iraq helicopter crash

By Naomi Spencer
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Fourteen US soldiers died in a helicopter crash August 22 during night operations near Kirkuk in northern Iraq. According to the initial Army press release, the Black Hawk helicopter went down after an unspecified mechanical malfunction, killing all aboard.

All of those killed were members of the Army's Task Force Lightning, a large unit stationed in Tikrit that includes 23,000 soldiers responsible for operations in northern Iraq.

In a separate incident Wednesday, one US soldier was killed and three others were wounded in a Baghdad raid. The 15 deaths gave Wednesday the highest death toll for US soldiers since January, according to the Associated Press.

The incident was the deadliest helicopter crash since January 2005, when a helicopter was caught in a sandstorm, leading to the deaths of 31 Marines. Earlier this year, 12 soldiers were killed when a helicopter was shot down in Diyala Province, north of Baghdad.

Wednesday's fatalities bring the American military death toll in Iraq to 3,722 since the invasion, and to 64 so far in August. More than 300 US military personnel have been wounded this month. The total US wounded reported by the Defense Department is now 27,400. Including non-US soldiers, the total number of occupying forces killed is 4,019.

The death toll for US soldiers in July was 79, down from the previous three months, which were marked by increased deaths due to the "surge"—104 in April, 126 in May, and 101 in June.

In addition, US Labor Department figures based on compensation claims filed by family members suggest that more than 1,000 contractors for American firms have been killed in Iraq since 2003. The Defense Department maintains that it does not keep records on contractor casualties, which are rarely reported in the press.

Iraqi civilians and security forces have suffered 1,252

deaths in August, according to an Iraq Coalition Casualties count based only on news reports. Last month, 1,690 Iraqis were reported killed. These figures far underestimate the depth of violence that has been inflicted on the Iraqi people, as a result of the US occupation.

Press reports on the nature and consequences of US operations in Iraq, including in Kirkuk, are sparse. Kirkuk is an oil-rich city that is at the center of mounting tensions in northern Iraq between Kurdish nationalists and Sunni and Shiite factions of the Iraqi elite.

A referendum is currently scheduled for November 15 to decide whether Kirkuk should become part of the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG). The Kurdish nationalists see the city as the prize they have earned for collaborating with the US occupying forces, but the US position is ambiguous. Both the US-backed Iraqi government and Turkey, a US ally, oppose Kirkuk's assimilation into the KRG.

Highlighting the growing tensions in the region, a suicide truck bomb on Wednesday killed at least 45 people in Baiji, a northern Iraqi city and home to Iraq's largest northern oil refinery.

The incident follows a week after a multiple truck bomb attack destroyed two small villages in northwestern Iraq and claimed the lives of at least 500 people. Another 1,500 were wounded, and the towns, which have been declared disaster areas, were all but leveled. Residents continue to pull the dead from the rubble.

The August 14 attacks, which appear to have been religiously motivated and directed against the minority Yazidi sect, exacted the worst loss of life of any assault of this type since the US invasion in 2003. Members of Sunni tribes around Kirkuk have been blamed for the bombings.

In July, 85 people were killed after a suicide bomb

exploded in a commercial district in Kirkuk. The bomb targeted the headquarters of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan—one of the main Kurdish nationalist parties.

While the Bush administration, along with leading Democrats, are championing supposed “successes” in Iraq in the run-up to a report from a top US general due in September, an August 19 opinion piece written by US soldiers operating in Northern Iraq highlighted the deteriorating situation for the US occupation.

In a jointly written editorial published in the *New York Times*, seven soldiers of Task Force Lightning’s 82nd Airborne Division contradicted the official US descriptions of progress and stabilization: “To believe that Americans, with an occupying force that long ago outlived its reluctant welcome, can win over a recalcitrant local population and win this counterinsurgency is far-fetched.” They continued, “[W]e are skeptical of recent press coverage portraying the conflict as increasingly manageable and feel it has neglected the mounting civil, political and social unrest we see every day.”

While not questioning the fundamental basis of the occupation, the soldiers painted a picture of mounting opposition from the Iraqi people. “In a lawless environment where men with guns rule the streets, engaging in the banalities of life has become a death-defying act. Four years into our occupation, we have failed on every promise, while we have substituted Baath Party tyranny with a tyranny of Islamist, militia and criminal violence. When the primary preoccupation of average Iraqis is when and how they are likely to be killed, we can hardly feel smug as we hand out care packages.”

As the occupation drags on, it will continue to exact an ever greater toll on US soldiers and the Iraqi population.

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