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Civilian deaths send top Marine to Iraq

Commandant expected to remind Marines to 'do what is right'

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WASHINGTON (CNN) -- As the military investigates two reports of Marines in Iraq allegedly killing innocent civilians, Gen. Michael Hagee, commandant of the Marine Corps, left for Iraq on Thursday to talk about use of force.

According to a statement released by the Marine Corps, Hagee is expected to address the core values of honor, courage and commitment, and "the risk of becoming indifferent to the loss of a human life."

"We do not employ force just for the sake of employing force. We use lethal force only when justified, proportional and, most importantly, lawful," Hagee will tell the Marines, according to a copy of his speech released by the Marine Corps. "This is the American way of war. We must regulate force and violence, we only damage property that must be damaged and we protect the non-combatants we find on the battlefield."

The speech, titled "On Marine Virtue," will also touch on the numbing effects of combat and of watching fellow Marines wounded or killed in fighting.

"There is the risk of becoming indifferent to the loss of a human life, as well as bringing dishonor upon ourselves," Hagee is expected to say. "Leaders of all grades need to reinforce continually that Marines care for one another and do what is right."

Sen. John Warner, R-Virginia, who chairs the Senate Armed Services Committee, said Hagee is making the trip because he takes the allegations "extremely seriously."



Marine Gen. Michael Hagee is expected to tell Marines to "use lethal force only when justified."

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"He felt that it was his duty to go over and personally look into this situation," Warner said, "and personally talk to those Marines in-country to assure them that the highest standards of the Corps are to be kept by every Marine, from private to general.

"He expects no less, nor do the people of this country expect any less."

Marines have come under fire recently for incidents -- one in November and one in April -- in which they allegedly killed Iraqi civilians. The Marine Corps has launched investigations into both incidents.

Several Marines from the 3rd Battalion, 5th Marine Regiment have been sent back to the United States while the military investigates whether Marines killed a civilian near Hamandiyah, west of Baghdad, on April 26.

Maj. Gen. Richard Zilmer, commander of 1st Marines Expeditionary Force, asked that the Naval Criminal Investigative Service look into the matter after Iraqis brought the allegations to Marine commanders at a May 1 meeting.

In November at least 15 Iraqi civilians in Haditha were killed while troops from the 3rd Battalion, 1st Marines were looking for insurgents who planted a roadside bomb that killed a member of their unit.

The Marines first said that the civilians had been killed by a roadside bomb, then later suggested they may have been caught in a firefight.

The battalion commander and two company commanders were relieved of their commands and reassigned to staff posts at Camp Pendleton, California.

Last week, Rep. John Murtha, D-Pennsylvania, a decorated retired Marine colonel who is opposed to the war in Iraq, said the investigation of the Haditha deaths would show that the toll was higher than 15 and that the Marines killed the civilians "in cold blood." He said he received his information from U.S. commanders.

"There was no firefight. There was no IED that killed these innocent people. Our troops overreacted because of the pressure on them, and they killed innocent civilians in cold blood," Murtha said. "They actually went into the houses and killed women and children."

An Iraqi human rights group, Hammurabi Human Rights Association, recorded the scene on video.

Warner said Thursday that he would rank both incidents as "very, very serious allegations." He said there was no timeline set for either investigation, but he expects both to be completed quickly.

As for the different stories offered by the Marines involved in the Haditha deaths, Warner said, "I have no basis at this time to say that there's any effort to cover up."

Hagee has kept the pertinent Capitol Hill committees apprised of developments in both cases. But because Central Command is conducting the investigations, "The full set of facts is yet to come to the commandant's desk," Warner said.

However, he said, "There have been facts substantiated to date to underpin those allegations as to what occurred, not to the individuals and their accountability."

Last week sources close to the Haditha investigation said key aspects of the original Marine account have not checked out.

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