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Iraqi government starts probe of Haditha civilian deaths

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Updated 6/2/2006 1:32 AM ET

BAGHDAD (AP) — The U.S. military ordered American commanders to hold ethical training on battlefield conduct, and the Iraqi government Thursday announced its own investigation into reports that U.S. Marines killed unarmed civilians last year.

Lt. Gen. Peter Chiarelli, the commander of U.S.-led forces in Iraq, said the ethical training would emphasize "professional military values and the importance of disciplined, professional conduct in combat," as well as Iraqi cultural expectations.

"As military professionals, it is important that we take time to reflect on the values that separate us from our enemies," he said in a statement. "The challenge for us is to make sure the actions of a few do not tarnish the good work of the many."

The training will be conducted in units in the next 30 days and was aimed at reinforcing training service members received before coming to Iraq.

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"Of the nearly 150,000 Coalition Forces presently in Iraq, 99.9% of them perform their jobs magnificently every day," Chiarelli said. Of those troops, about 130,000 are from the United States.

"They do their duty with honor under difficult circumstances. They exhibit sound judgment, honesty and integrity. They display patience, professionalism and restraint in the face of a treacherous enemy. And they do the right thing even when no one is watching," Chiarelli said.

He added, however, that "unfortunately, there are a few individuals who sometimes choose the wrong path."

The U.S. Marine Commandant, Gen. Michael W. Hagee, traveled to Iraq last week and cautioned troops on the danger of becoming "indifferent to the loss of a human life."

Their comments came amid rising anger over allegations that U.S. Marines shot and killed 24 civilians, including women in children, in the western city of Haditha on Nov. 19, after a bomb attack on a military convoy killed a Marine.

"It appears to be a horrible crime," Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki told a news conference. "A large number of women, men and children have been eliminated because of an explosion that targeted a vehicle of the multinational forces."

The U.S. military already is conducting at least two investigations into the killings, and now Iraqi Cabinet members have decided to launch a separate inquiry, Adnan al-Kazimi, an adviser to al-Maliki, told The Associated Press.

He said a special committee of the Justice and Human Rights ministries, along with security officials, will handle the probe.

U.S. military investigators have evidence that points toward unprovoked murders by Marines in Haditha, a senior defense official said last week. And a U.S. military investigation will conclude that some officers gave false testimony to their superiors, who then failed to scrutinize the reports adequately, The Washington Post reported.

The military probe, which is separate from an investigation into possible criminal actions by the Marines, also will call for changes in how troops are trained for duty in Iraq, the Post reported.

"We do want to express our deepest condolences to the families who lost a loved one in Haditha," Maj. Gen. William Caldwell, spokesman for U.S.-led forces in Iraq, said at a Baghdad news conference. "The coalition does not and will not tolerate any unethical or criminal behavior. All allegations of such activity will be fully investigated."

He added that the U.S. military constantly strives to avoid civilian casualties and has promised the deaths in Haditha, 140 miles northwest of Baghdad, will be fully investigated.

"Let me be very clear about one point. The coalition does not and will not tolerate any unethical or criminal behavior. Any allegations of such activities will be fully investigated and any members found to have committed these violations will be held accountable," Caldwell said.

He said that "about three or four" inquiries were being carried out around Iraq but would not provide any details.

Chiarelli ordered an investigation into the Haditha killings on Feb. 14 and based on the initial findings ordered a further, ongoing inquiry, Caldwell said. He would not talk about any specifics on that investigation or a separate probe by the U.S. Navy criminal investigative service.

"The naval criminal investigative service is investigating allegations of misconduct stemming from the Marines actions," he said, adding that their findings would be reported to the commanding general of Marine forces central command "for appropriate action."

He said that the investigation being conducted by Chiarelli was looking at "policies and procedures such as those pertaining to training and reporting," while the Navy was looking "looking into allegations of criminal misconduct."

The Iraqi prime minister said he asked a ministerial committee to hold talks with the U.S. military to set ground rules for raids and detentions.

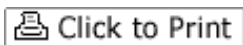
When asked about Iraqi complaints that U.S. forces show no regard for their lives during raids and detentions, al-Maliki said he objected to such practices.

"We cannot forgive violations of the dignity of the Iraqi people," he said at a news conference. He also said the Cabinet had agreed to issue a statement denouncing such practices.

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