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U.S. to Cooperate With Iraqis on Haditha Inquiry

By **JOHN O'NEIL** and **RICHARD A. OPPEL Jr.**

The American military will cooperate with the Iraqi government in its investigation into reports of killings of civilians, the chief of staff for United States forces in [Iraq](#) said in Baghdad this morning.

The pledge of cooperation came a day after Prime Minister Nuri Kamal al-Maliki lashed out at the American military, denouncing what he characterized as habitual attacks by troops against Iraqi civilians, and other senior leaders in the new government demanded that the United States turn over documents related to reports that marines killed 24 Iraqis in the town of Haditha last year.

Late this afternoon, two Pentagon officials said American troops had been cleared in connection with another incident, The Associated Press reported. The A.P. said an inquiry had determined that the troops had not killed civilians intentionally in a March 15 raid on Ishaqi, a village north of Baghdad, but had instead followed normal procedures as they came under attack upon approaching a building.

The BBC had broadcast footage showing the bodies of dead children and quoting Iraqi police officials as saying that the victims all died of gunshot wounds to the head or stomach.

The A.P. also reported earlier today that one of its television news cameramen had taken

footage that showed one adult and four children with what it described as "obvious entry wounds to the head," and one child who appeared to be shot in the side.

At the time, the American military said that three civilians in Ishaqi had died when ground and air forces fired on a farmhouse after insurgents opened fire from outside it, but that it was investigating claims by Iraqi officials said that an entire 11-member family, from a 75-year-old grandmother to a 6-month-old baby, had died in the attack.

In Baghdad today, Brig. Gen. Donald M. Campbell Jr., the chief of staff for American forces in Iraq, called the various allegations "disturbing" and "frustrating," but cautioned that there should not be a "rush to judgment on every incident we see."

Tony Snow, the White House spokesman, said today that President Bush was "troubled" by allegations concerning the Haditha and Ishaqi incidents, as well as the fatal shooting of an Iraqi man in Hamadiya. In that case, which was first reported Thursday by The Associated Press, military prosecutors say they are preparing murder, kidnapping and conspiracy charges against seven marines and a Navy corpsman, and the death of civilians in a March attack in Ishaqi, a village north of Baghdad.

General Campbell said in a televised briefing that he did not believe the incidents would not create a rift between the United States and the Iraqi government. "We're very confident that the new prime minister and his government will work with us through this investigation," he said. "We're going to give them whatever assistance they need."

Today, speaking at a press conference in Baghdad with House Speaker [J. Dennis Hastert](#), Mr. Maliki said that an independent commission had been formed to look into what he referred to as "the massacre committed against a group of innocents."

General Campbell said today that "99 percent of the soldiers in the field are doing tremendous work every day."

But he acknowledged that stress was high when "dealing with enemy combatants who do not abide by the rules of war."

"It doesn't excuse the acts that have occurred, and we're going to investigate them," General Campbell said. "It's stress, fear, isolation and in some cases they're just upset. They see their buddies getting blown up on occasion and they could snap."

But in his comments on Thursday, Mr. Maliki said violence against civilians had become a "daily phenomenon" by many troops in the American-led coalition who "do not respect the Iraqi people."

"They crush them with their vehicles and kill them just on suspicion," he said. "This is completely unacceptable." Attacks on civilians will play a role in future decisions on how long to ask American forces to remain in Iraq, the prime minister added.

The denunciation was an unusual declaration for a government that remains desperately dependent on American forces to keep some form of order in the country amid a resilient Sunni Arab insurgency in the west, widespread sectarian violence in Baghdad, and deadly feuding among Shiite militias that increasingly control the south.

In response to a question as to whether the United States would permit American soldiers to be charged by Iraq, General Campbell said today that no status of forces agreement had yet been concluded with the new government, which took office late last month.

Mr. Maliki's angry words were also a sign of the growing pressure he faces. His governing coalition includes Sunni Arabs who were enraged by news of the killings in Haditha, a city deep in Sunni-dominated Anbar Province. At the same time, he is being pushed by the Americans to resolve the quarreling within his fragile coalition that has left him unable to fill cabinet posts for the Ministries of Defense and the Interior, the two top security jobs in the country.

Military and Congressional officials have said they believe that an investigation into the deaths of two dozen Iraqis in Haditha on Nov. 19 will show that a group of marines shot and killed civilians without justification or provocation. Survivors in Haditha say the troops shot men, women and children in the head and chest at close range.

For the second day in a row, President Bush spoke directly about the furor surrounding the case. "Obviously, the allegations are very troubling for me and equally troubling for our military, especially the Marine Corps," President Bush said Thursday, in response to a question from a reporter after a meeting of his cabinet. Referring to the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Gen. Peter Pace, he added, "I've spoken to General Pace about this issue quite a few times."

Investigators are examining the role of senior commanders in the aftermath of the Haditha killings, and trying to determine how high up the chain of command culpability may rest.

Marine officials said Thursday that Maj. Gen. Stephen T. Johnson, who was the top Marine Corps commander in Iraq during the Haditha killings, had been set to be promoted to become the service's senior officer in charge of personnel, a three-star position.

General Johnson is widely respected by the Marine Corps' senior leadership, yet officials said it was unlikely that the Pentagon would put him up for promotion until the Haditha

investigations were concluded.

The Washington Post reported Thursday that a parallel investigation into whether the killings were covered up has concluded that some officers reported false information and that superiors failed to adequately scrutinize the reports about the two dozen deaths.

The newspaper said that the inquiry had determined that Staff Sgt. Frank Wuterich, a squad leader present at Haditha, made a false statement when he reported that a roadside bombing had killed 15 civilians. The inquiry also said that an intelligence unit that later visited the site failed to highlight that civilians had gunshot wounds.

In Baghdad, senior Iraqi officials demanded an apology and explanation about Haditha from the United States and vowed their own inquiry.

"We in the ministers' cabinet condemned this crime and demanded that coalition forces show the reasons behind this massacre," Deputy Prime Minister Salam al-Zubaie, one of the most powerful Sunni Arabs in the new government, said in an interview.

"As you know, this is not the only massacre, and there are a lot," he said. "The coalition forces must change their behavior. Human blood should be sacred regardless of religion, party and nationality."

Mr. Zubaie, also the acting defense minister, acknowledged that Iraqi officials would probably not be able to force the extradition of any troops suspected of culpability in the Haditha killings. But he said a committee of five ministers, including defense, interior and finance, would investigate the killings with the expectation that American officials would turn over their files. "We do not have the security file because it is in the hands of the coalition forces," he said.

"We hope there will not be obstacles ahead."

The crisis over Haditha and other disputed killings in Sunni areas comes just as it appears that military operations may be needed to retake some Sunni areas at risk of falling to the insurgency.

This week American forces ordered 1,500 troops from Kuwait into Anbar Province, a stronghold of the Sunni insurgency, in the latest sign that insurgents and terrorist groups including those led by [Abu Musab al-Zarqawi](#) control much of the sprawling desert region.

Defense Secretary [Donald H. Rumsfeld](#) today defended the training and conduct of American troops.

"We know that 99.9 percent of our forces conduct themselves in an exemplary manner. We also know that in conflicts things that shouldn't happen, do happen," he said. "We don't expect U.S. soldiers to act that way, and they're trained not to."

Attorney General [Alberto Gonzales](#) called the allegations "very, very serious" and said the world will see a thorough military investigation.

"If people are found to have committed crimes, those people will be held responsible and they will be held accountable," Mr. Gonzales said today in an interview with WOAI-AM, a radio station in San Antonio, The Associated Press reported. "The president expects that, and I know the leadership in the military wants to see that happen as well."

In interviews on Thursday, two senior Republicans — Senator [John W. Warner](#) of Virginia, the chairman of the Armed Services Committee, and Senator [John McCain](#) of Arizona, who is next

in line to be committee chairman — both said it was too soon to tell whether the episode would undermine support for the war. Still, both expressed concern.

Senator Warner, who has promised to hold hearings as soon as the military completes its investigation, said he had been urging Defense Secretary Donald H. Rumsfeld to wrap up the inquiry as swiftly as possible.

"In the interim, frankly, the public opinion on this matter is being influenced by misinformation, leaks and undocumented and uncorroborated facts," he said.

Mr. McCain, who was a prisoner of war in Vietnam for more than five years, said the incident harked back to the My Lai massacre during the war in Vietnam. He added, "It certainly is harmful, but I can't assess the extent of the damage."

Neither he nor Mr. McCain would say whether Mr. Rumsfeld should be called as a witness.

"I think it depends on what we find out," Mr. McCain said. "I can't say until we really know what happened. There are allegations, and I emphasize allegations, that there was a cover-up. If so, then obviously more senior people would have to be the subject of hearings."

On Wednesday, American troops near the restive city of Samarra shot and killed two Iraqi women, including one who might have been pregnant and on her way to a hospital, after their car did not heed what the American military command said were repeated warnings to stop.

In Baghdad, the top American ground commander in Iraq ordered that all 150,000 American and allied troops in the country receive mandatory refresher training on "legal, moral and ethical standards on the battlefield."

In a statement, the officer, Lt. Gen. Peter W. Chiarelli, did not specifically cite the civilian deaths in Haditha as the reason for the unusual order.

But he said commanders would be provided with training materials and sample vignettes to use to instruct on professional military values and conduct in combat, as well as Iraqi cultural sensitivities.

John O'Neil reported from New York for this article and Richard A. Oppel Jr. from Baghdad. Reporting was contributed by Eric Schmitt, Sheryl Gay Stolberg, Jim Rutenberg, Mark Mazzetti and David S. Cloud from Washington, and Omar al-Neami from Baghdad.

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