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Family shot dead by panicking US troops

Firing blindly during a power cut, soldiers kill a father and three children in their car

By Justin Huggler in Baghdad

10 August 2003

The abd al-Kerim family didn't have a chance. American soldiers opened fire on their car with no warning and at close quarters. They killed the father and three of the children, one of them only eight years old. Now only the mother, Anwar, and a 13-year-old daughter are alive to tell how the bullets tore through the windscreen and how they screamed for the Americans to stop.

"We never did anything to the Americans and they just killed us," the heavily pregnant Ms abd al-Kerim said. "We were calling out to them 'Stop, stop, we are a family', but they kept on shooting."

The story of how Adel abd al-Kerim and three of his children were killed emerged yesterday, exactly 100 days after President George Bush declared the war in Iraq was over. In Washington yesterday, Mr Bush declared in a radio address: "Life is returning to normal for the Iraqi people ... All Americans can be proud of what our military and provisional authorities have achieved in Iraq."

But in this city Iraqi civilians still die needlessly almost every day at the hands of nervous, trigger-happy American soldiers.

Doctors said the father and his two daughters would have survived if they had received treatment quicker. Instead, they were left to bleed to death because the Americans refused to allow anyone to take them to hospital.

It happened at 9.30 at night, an hour after sunset, but long before the start of the curfew at 11pm. The Americans had set up roadblocks in the Tunisia quarter of Baghdad, where the abd al-Kerims live. The family pulled up to the roadblock sensibly, slowly and carefully, so as not to alarm the Americans.

But then pandemonium broke out. American soldiers were shooting in every direction. They

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just turned on the abd al-Kerims' car and sprayed it with bullets. You can see the holes in the front passenger window and in the rear window. You can see the blood of the dead all over the grey, imitation velvet seat covers.

A terrible misunderstanding took place. The Americans thought they were under attack from Iraqi resistance forces, according to several Iraqi witnesses. These are the circumstances of most killings of Iraqi civilians: a US patrol comes under rocket-propelled grenade attack and the soldiers panic and fire randomly.

This time there was no attack. Another car, driven by an Iraqi youth, Sa'ad al-Azawi, drove too fast up to another checkpoint further up the street. Al-Azawi and his two passengers did not hear an order to stop, as their stereo was turned up too loud. The US soldiers, thinking they were under attack, panicked and opened fire.

In the darkness of one of Baghdad's frequent power cuts, other US soldiers on the street heard gunfire and thought they were under attack. They, too, reacted by opening fire, though they could not see what was going on. Soldiers manning look-out posts on a nearby building joined in, firing down the street in the dark.

It was then that the abd al-Kerims drew up to the checkpoint. The panicking US soldiers turned on their car and shot the family to pieces.

"It was anarchy," said Ali al-Issawi, who lives on the street and witnessed the whole thing. "The Americans were firing at each other."

There was plenty of evidence lying in the street under the hot sun. Empty bullet casings lay everywhere. Bullet holes marked the walls and gates of nearby houses. Several parked cars were riddled with bullet-holes, their windows smashed and tyres shredded. From the spread of the bullet holes all over the street, it was clear the soldiers had fired in every direction.

Sa'ad al-Azawi, the driver of the other car, was killed. The Americans dragged his two passengers out and beat them, still thinking they were resistance, Mr al-Issawi said. Watching from his house nearby, Mr al-Issawi did not know that al-Azawi was dead, and when the car burst into flames, he tried to rush over to help the young man.

"The Americans did not let me," he said. "A soldier came over and told me 'Inside'. He pushed me, even though my eight-year-old daughter was with me. They didn't let us get the young guy's body out of the car until he looked like he had been cooked."

Further down the street, Anwar abd al-Kerim, who was heavily pregnant and had somehow managed to escape injury in the car as bullets rained all around her, got out of the car, holding her wounded eight-year-old daughter Mervet, and sought help from her brother, who lived down the road.

She had to leave in the car her injured daughters, 16-year-old Ia and 13-year-old Haded, along with her husband, Adel, who was bleeding badly and groaning. Her 18-year-old son, Haider, was already dead. A bullet went between his eyes.

"I saw my sister running towards me with her daughter in her arms and blood pouring from her," said Ms abd al-Kerim's brother, Tha'er Jawad. "She was crying out to me 'Help, help, go and help Adel'." I put them in my car and tried to drive to the car but the American soldiers pointed their guns at me and the people shouted out to me 'Stop! Stop! They will shoot!'

"We could see the other girls and their brother lying on the back seat of the car. They would not let us go to the hospital." Ia was not as badly injured as the others. "After a while they released her and let her come to us," Mr Jawad said. "But when they finally let us go to the hospital, Mervet died. The doctors checked her injuries and told us she would have lived if we had brought her sooner.

"At 10.45 we heard the Americans had taken Adel and his other girl to another hospital. We went there at six the next morning, when the curfew was lifted, and they told us they both died in the hospital.

"The doctors said they might have lived if they got there sooner: the main cause of death was bleeding. The Americans left them to bleed in the street for hours."

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