



Iraq: Campaign of Mass Murders of Sunni Prisoners

Publisher [Human Rights Watch](#)

Publication Date 11 July 2014

Cite as Human Rights Watch, *Iraq: Campaign of Mass Murders of Sunni Prisoners*, 11 July 2014, available at: <http://www.refworld.org/docid/53c4e8124.html> [accessed 5 August 2014]

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Iraqi security forces and militias affiliated with the government appear to have unlawfully executed at least 255 prisoners in six Iraqi cities and villages since June 9, 2014. In all but one case, the executions took place while the fighters were fleeing Islamic State of Iraq and Sham (ISIS) and other armed groups. The vast majority of security forces and militias are Shia, while the murdered prisoners were Sunni. At least eight of those killed were boys under age 18.

The mass extrajudicial killings may be evidence of war crimes or crimes against humanity, and appear to be revenge killings for atrocities by ISIS, a Sunni extremist group that in the past month has captured large areas from the Shia-led central government. ISIS, which on June 30 changed its name to Islamic State, summarily executed scores of captured soldiers, Shia militiamen, and Shia religious minorities in areas it controls.

"Gunning down prisoners is an outrageous violation of international law," said Joe Stork, deputy Middle East director at Human Rights Watch. "While the world rightly denounces the atrocious acts of ISIS, it should not turn a blind eye to sectarian killing sprees by government and pro-government forces."

An international commission of inquiry or a similar mechanism should investigate serious violations of the laws of war and international human rights law by all sides in the Iraq conflict, including by government forces, pro-government militias, and ISIS and associated forces, Human Rights Watch said. The inquiry should be mandated to establish the facts, and identify those responsible for serious violations with a view to ensuring that they are held accountable. The inquiry should collect and conserve information related to abuses for future use by judicial institutions.

Human Rights Watch documented five massacres of prisoners between June 9 and 21 - in Mosul and Tal Afar in northern Nineveh province, in Baaquba and Jumarkhe in eastern Diyala province, and in Rawa in western Anbar province. In each attack, statements by witnesses, security forces and government officials indicate that Iraqi soldiers or police, pro-government Shia militias, or

combinations of the three extrajudicially executed the prisoners, in nearly all cases by shooting them. In one case the killers also set dozens of prisoners on fire, and in two cases they threw grenades into cells.

More than a dozen residents and activists in the attack areas told Human Rights Watch they believed that as ISIS began freeing Sunni prisoners elsewhere as it advanced south, Iraqi security forces and militia killed the prisoners to prevent them from joining the rebellion, as well as to avenge ISIS killings of captive government troops. The murder of detainees during armed conflict is a war crime and, if carried out on a large scale or in a systematic manner, as a state policy, would be a crime against humanity.

Iraq's government has in the past denied allegations that it summarily executed prisoners. The Defense and Interior Ministries did not reply to requests for comment from Human Rights Watch on the five cases it documented.

Human Rights Watch interviewed more than 35 people in person or by telephone about the five attacks. They included witnesses and relatives of those killed, security and other government officials, and local activists. Many had fled their homes and spoke on condition of anonymity, fearing reprisals by government forces. Human Rights Watch also reviewed video footage, still photos and media reports of the killings.

Reuters news agency, quoting police sources, reported that in a sixth attack, on June 23 in central Babil province, police executed 69 prisoners in their cells in the city of Hilla before transferring their bodies to Baghdad later that day.

The government has been fighting Sunni armed groups in Anbar since January 1. ISIS and other Sunni armed groups captured Mosul, Iraq's second-largest city and capital of Nineveh province, on June 10, then moved through other areas across Iraq.

The majority of prisoners killed in the five attacks had been rounded up under article 4 of Iraq's anti-terrorism law, but had not been charged with any crime. Some had been imprisoned for months, while others were detained shortly after ISIS began its takeover of Mosul on June 9.

In the first attack, on the night of June 9, prison guards removed 15 Sunni prisoners from their cells at the Counterterrorism and Organized Crime prison, in the heart of Mosul, a former prisoner told CNN. The prisoner later told Human Rights Watch that the men were Sunnis from the minority Turkmen community. Amnesty International quoted a second prisoner as saying the guards removed 13 prisoners and that he then heard gunfire. A short time later, both prisoners said, a prison guard threw a hand grenade into one cell. The prisoner who spoke with Amnesty said six prisoners were killed in the grenade attack.

Two days later, Mosul residents discovered 15 decomposing bodies of men who had been shot, and in some cases handcuffed or blindfolded, near an abandoned potato warehouse in Mosul, two residents and the prisoner who spoke with Human Rights Watch said. That prisoner said he went to the site and recognized two fellow prisoners who had been among the 15 men led away by the prison guards.

In one of the following attacks, on June 16 in Tal Afar, 50 kilometers west of Mosul, three or four gunmen whom witnesses said were Shia militiamen opened fire with assault rifles and other weapons in four cells of that city's Counterterrorism and Organized Crime prison. Witnesses, local government officials, and local civil society activists told Human Rights Watch that the attack killed at least 51 prisoners. The attack took place before dawn, as ISIS was poised to capture Tal Afar, and the dead included three teenage boys, they said.

The counterterrorism prison in Tal Afar is a branch of the counterterrorism prison in Mosul, a local government official said. Both were under the control of the Interior Ministry, whose acting head is Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki.

That same night, according to police and government sources, 43 detainees were killed inside the al-Wahda police station, near Baaquba, the capital of Diyala province, 50 kilometers northeast of Baghdad. Police sources told Human Rights Watch that the prisoners died in crossfire during an ISIS attack on the prison, but other local civil government officials said that prison guards and Shia militiamen killed the prisoners.

A medical worker at Baaquba general hospital, where first responders took the dead prisoners, told Human Rights Watch that he saw the 43 bodies. All were shot in the head execution-style and their limbs were broken, he said. Another detainee, Ahmed Zeidan, the only known survivor, died the next day an hour after police took him from the hospital where he was being treated.

The medical worker said the police came for Zeidan shortly after he told the Diyala governor, Amer al-Mujamii, from his hospital bed that prison guards and Shia militiamen carried out the attack. When the police returned Zeidan, the medical worker said, he was dead. The medical worker said he saw bullet wounds in Zeidan's stomach and legs, which had not been there before he had been taken away from the hospital.

On the morning of June 17, pro-government Shia militiamen killed at least 43 male prisoners inside an army base in the village of Jumarkhe, also in Diyala. At least three were boys, said a man who saw the bodies and a soldier from the base. All were Sunnis whom Iraqi forces had rounded up a week to 10 days earlier from Jumarkhe and surrounding villages, and all had been burned to death or shot, they said.

In Rawa, on June 21, soldiers from the al-Jazeera and Badiyya operations command, which oversees the Iraqi government's military operations in Anbar province, killed 25 prisoners and injured three others whom they were holding in their military base, according to a Rawa resident who found the bodies in the prison a short while later and spoke to the three survivors. The survivors told him police killed the prisoners, he said, and two were boys ages 12 and 16.

Two days later, on June 23, 69 prisoners were killed in Hilla, according to figures police sources gave to Reuters. Hilla's governor told Reuters that the prisoners were killed as police were transporting them from a prison in Hilla to another prison in Baghdad when armed opposition militants attacked the convoy. But police sources told Reuters that police extrajudicially executed the men in their Hilla prison cells.

Human Rights Watch spoke to 16 residents, two local human rights activists and 10 local government officials. Those with knowledge of each episode said that militia from the Badr brigade, headed by Transport Minister Hadi al-Ameri, were involved in the attacks on the prisoners in Tal Afar and Jumarkhe, and that Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq, a powerful pro-government Shia militia active in Baghdad, areas around the capitol, and Diyala, also carried out the killings in Jumarkhe and facilitated the police in the prisoner killings in Baaquba.

An international inquiry into violations of the laws of war and international human rights law by all sides in the Iraq conflict investigation should include examining whether security forces, working with pro-government militias, have pre-emptively killed prisoners. The United States and other countries engaged in Iraq should halt military assistance to the Maliki government until it takes concrete steps to halt crimes like killing prisoners, Human Rights Watch said.

Maliki also needs to remove and prosecute all commanders involved in these slaughters, Human Rights Watch said. Killing prisoners, even those who were combatants, is a war crime.

"In each case that Human Rights Watch investigated, the accounts we heard point directly to Iraqi security forces and pro-government militia slaughtering captive men in large numbers as ISIS and allied fighters were poised to seize the area," Stork said. "This isn't one rogue commander on the loose - this seems to be a widespread campaign of killing Sunni prisoners in cold blood."

For additional details on the cases Human Rights Watch documented, please see below.

Mosul: Prison Attack and Bodies Outside Potato Warehouse

On the night of June 9, hours before ISIS captured Mosul the following morning, Iraqi government guards at the city's Counterterrorism and Organized Crime prison appear to have executed 15 prisoners, then dumped them in a ravine, according to interviews with three people who saw the bodies, and three government officials who said they were briefed on the killings. A former prisoner said one guard also threw a grenade into a cell, and a second prisoner told Amnesty International that the grenade attack killed at least six prisoners.

ISIS fighters entered the outskirts of Mosul on June 8. By the time they captured the city the morning of June 10, Iraqi forces had abandoned their posts. Three witnesses told Human Rights Watch that after fighting ended, and residents emerged from their homes on June 11 and 12, they saw about 15 decomposing bodies off the side of the road in an area that had been under army control.

The bodies lay in a ravine next to the Al-Karama industrial zone in eastern Mosul, about 100 meters from a base for the Iraqi army's 2nd division and near an abandoned potato warehouse, according to four local and regional officials as well as four local residents. A former prisoner first featured in a CNN report told Human Rights Watch that at least two of the bodies were of 15 fellow detainees he knew from the Counterterrorism and Organized Crime prison, whom he saw guards take away in handcuffs on January 9. The prison is in the Hayy al-Tayaran neighborhood, near the airport and across the city from the industrial zone.

Two of the Mosul residents said they saw the bodies in the ravine on the afternoon of June 12. One of them, a lawyer, gave Human Rights Watch video footage and photos of the site. He said he was driving by the potato warehouse on the way back from checking on a relative and stopped when he saw a large crowd gathered off the side of the road:

The crowd was filming something. I got out of my car and took a look. Down in a crevice by the side of the road I saw a pile of bodies. Some of them were handcuffed. Some of them were blindfolded. Some appeared burned. Some of them appeared to be in pieces. They were not in uniforms.

The lawyer said he did not know who killed them.

The video clips and photos taken by the lawyer show men lying in contorted positions in the gravel of a ravine, with crowds of onlookers, including children, filming their corpses and stepping over the bodies. Many of their faces were blackened because of decomposition. Human Rights Watch counted 15 bodies in the video and photos, including at least one with handcuffs and one with a blindfold.

Local and regional officials who fled Mosul after it fell to ISIS confirmed the presence of the bodies in the ravine and told Human Rights Watch they had been informed by local government security sources that they were most likely prisoners killed by Iraqi forces. They said they did not have additional information because of their inability to investigate incidents since the city's fall.

Amnesty International and CNN, each citing a different former prisoner, reported on June 27 and June 28, respectively, that the bodies in the ravine were those of prisoners in Mosul's

counterterrorism prison. The former prisoner who spoke with Amnesty said he saw guards take away 13 prisoners on June 9, not 15 as the other prisoner told CNN and Human Rights Watch.

Later that night, both prisoners said, one guard opened a cell and threw a grenade inside. The prisoner who spoke with Amnesty International said the grenade attack killed six prisoners and injured several others.

The prisoner first interviewed by CNN told Human Rights Watch that all 15 prisoners taken by the guards were Sunnis from the minority Turkmen community in Tal Afar. Later that night, he said, ISIS entered the prison and freed the remaining inmates. The former prisoner said that when he heard about the bodies near the potato warehouse, he went to see them on July 11. He said he recognized two friends among the 15 whom he saw guards lead out of the prison.

Local and regional officials told Human Rights Watch that the counterterrorism prison at the time was under the direct control of Prime Minister Maliki, who is also acting interior minister. One regional official said a security source who was in the prison at the time told him that an officer with the counterterrorism unit of Iraq's National Investigation and Information Directorate, which ran the prison, carried out the grenade attack, throwing three grenades and killing as many as 15 prisoners.

Tal Afar: Massacre at Castle Prison

At about 2 a.m. on June 16 in Tal Afar, 50 kilometers west of Mosul, at a second Counterterrorism and Organized Crime Prison inside a historic hilltop fortress known as the Castle, three gunmen killed at least 51 prisoners, at least three of them boys ages 15 to 17, according to a local government official and four former prisoners who witnessed the attack.

The counterterrorism prison in Tal Afar is a sub-section of the Counterterrorism and Organized Crime prison in Mosul, local and regional officials said, and is also under the command of al-Maliki in his capacity as acting interior minister.

Human Rights Watch interviewed four prisoners who survived, the father of one of the slain prisoners, seven regional and local political and security officials, two local journalists, and two local activists who had investigated the attacks.

Most said the pro-Maliki Badr Brigades were de-facto commanders of the counterterrorism base and prison at the Castle. The survivors provided first names of the gunmen, whom they said they heard calling out to each other during the attack. The gunmen could not have been with ISIS because ISIS did not enter the city until dawn, they said.

Human Rights Watch viewed videos of four interviews of prisoners by an Iraqi journalist in Mosul's main hospital hours after the attack, and reviewed photos and video of the slain prisoners, including a video that was aired by CNN on June 28.

Officials and former prisoners gave varying estimates of the number of prisoners inside the prison but all agreed there were at least 60, most Sunni farmers and laborers from Tal Afar and surrounding areas who had been rounded up in the preceding weeks and months under article 4. The surviving prisoners, local officials and activists told Human Rights Watch that the attack took place a few hours before ISIS entered Tal Afar, as Iraqi security forces fled the city. For the three preceding days, the prisoners said, ISIS had been shelling the castle. But before dawn that day, they awoke to what they said was the sound of heavy vehicles pulling into the castle compound and then gunfire inside the prison cells.

Three of the prisoners were among at least six who survived by huddling in the bathroom at the back of the largest cell, housing about 34 detainees. They said they heard the gunmen shout "Corner! Corner," a routine command for inmates to gather in the corner opposite the door, before

storming one cell. They also said they heard the sound of three weapons - two assault rifles and a weapon firing faster rounds that one of them believed to be a machinegun.

One of those survivors, a 52-year-old laborer, said the gunmen moved "very fast:"

I heard a lot of noises and shooting in the other cell rooms. I heard the prisoners crying "Ya Rab Sa'edna!" [God Help us] and "Allahu Akbar!" [God is Greatest] over the sound of the gunfire. I ran into the bathroom to hide. Then I heard the noise of Kalashnikovs and of a machine gun in my cell ... It lasted not more than two minutes. I acted like a dead man, I didn't move for about 5 to 10 minutes.

A 14-year-old survivor who was imprisoned with his 15-year-old brother described the gunmen entering their cell, containing between 16 and 19 inmates:

We heard something strange just outside the door. Then the gunmen opened the small windows in the doors and the doors themselves, and right away they began shooting. I hid behind another prisoner but I was still shot in my upper arm and thigh. I can't describe to you those next three to four hours. I just lay there with those dead bodies around me. One of those dead bodies was my brother.

The survivors in the bathroom said that they could hear the voices of four men, one of whom appeared to be a ringleader who urged the others to follow him with orders including, "Come! There is another room!"

Two survivors said they recognized one of the gunmen's voices and one of the names as those of men who were frequently in the prison but were not regular guards. One prisoner who heard but did not see the gunmen said that the regular guards would have known to search for prisoners in the bathroom.

Once the shooting stopped, the survivors in the bathroom said they heard the sound of vehicles leaving the compound. They waited several more minutes before creeping out. The laborer said he was the first to emerge and had no way out except to pass through the largest cell:

I saw the bodies of my fellow prisoners, their limbs limp, their blood on the bedding on the floor. I only saw two who were still alive, but they were badly injured. They said, "Please help us." I took one of them out to the courtyard of the building, but I couldn't bring myself to go back into the cell. I saw that the gate to the prison was open. Without being able to control myself, I ran away.

But when the sun rose and I saw townspeople heading up to the prison, I decided to go back to help. I saw a lot of my friends were killed in the other rooms as well. In the first room I saw four dead people. In the second room, seven dead people. In the next room, 16 people.

Another prisoner who said he followed the laborer out of the bathroom said the injured prisoners were "crying out for help, shouting things like, 'Oh God, what has happened!' "

Human Rights Watch obtained video and still photos of the attack from a Mosul journalist that showed men lying in heaps on their floor pallets, with blood splattered on their bodies and the cell walls. A human rights activist in Tal Afar said the photos were of the victims.

One relative of a prisoner who was killed told Human Rights Watch that as soon as word spread the night of June 15 that ISIS was poised to enter Tal Afar, he had "begged" local Shia sheikhs to ensure that the police and militiamen did not carry out reprisal attacks:

They told me, "Don't worry, nothing will happen." But when I got to the prison the next morning I really cannot describe what I saw. They were killed so brutally. These were the acts of barbarians.

Baaquba: Killings in al-Wahda Police Station

On June 16, at least 43 detainees were shot to death in the al-Wahda police station near Baaquba, the capital of Diyala province east of Baghdad. Another detainee was severely injured, and died the following day after police took him from the hospital where he was recovering from bullet wounds, and where paramedics took the survivor and bodies of the prisoners. Diyala's police chief told Human Rights Watch that the detainees died in crossfire when armed men attacked the police station, but based on accounts from three government officials and a surviving prisoner, Human RightsWatch concluded that police deliberately killed the detainees.

Diyala's police chief, Brig. Gen. Jamil al-Shimmari, who said he did not witness the attack, told Human Rights Watch that he was in contact with police at the al-Wahda police station via telephone when ISIS fighters attacked the police station at 8 p.m. At the same time, he said, another group of ISIS fighters attacked a police "emergency unit" two kilometers from the police station.

"They launched mortars and hand grenades at the police station and an emergency unit from nearby houses," he said, "and exploded two car bombs, one in front of the police station and one in front of the emergency unit." Al-Shimmari said the attack lasted about five hours, and that about 100 ISIS fighters were able to enter the police station with AK-47s. In their ensuing fight with police and a team of Special Weapons and Tactics (SWAT) reinforcements, he said, 44 prisoners and one policeman were killed in crossfire.

Al-Shimmari told Human Rights Watch that nine ISIS fighters also died but none were arrested, and said he could not identify the prisoners or the ISIS fighters who died by name. He identified the policeman who he said was killed in the crossfire as Wissam Kudhair Abbas.

Al-Shimmari's account differs from that of a military spokesman, Lt. Gen. Qassim al-Moussawi. The Associated Press reported that al-Moussawi said at a news conference on June 17 that 52 inmates were killed by mortar shells when ISIS fighters attacked the police station.

Despite these accounts, two government officials, one an employee at the hospital where the prisoners' bodies were taken and the other a relative of one of the prisoners killed, said the prisoners were all shot, most of them "execution style" in the head, and not killed randomly in crossfire or by mortar strikes.

An official close to the Diyala governorate told Human Rights Watch that he saw the prisoners' bodies on June 17 and that most had bullet wounds in the head. He said that Diyala's governor, Amer al-Mujamii, visited the sole surviving prisoner in the hospital before police removed him and returned his body one hour later. The governor's spokesman later told Reuters that the survivor told the governor that police had attacked the prisoners.

A member of the medical staff at the Baaquba General Hospital, where first responders took the bodies of the murdered prisoners, told Human Rights Watch that he saw ambulance drivers bring 44 bodies to the hospital morgue. He said employees in the morgue told him that, in addition to multiple gunshot wounds, most of the prisoners had broken arms and legs, suggesting that the men were tortured before they were killed.

The medical staff member told Human Rights Watch that the lone surviving prisoner, Ahmed Zeidan, arrived at the hospital alive about 9 a.m. the day after the attack.

"Ambulance drivers at first brought Zeidan to the morgue in a body bag with all the others," he said. "When the doctors at the morgue opened the bag, they realized he was alive and sent him back to the hospital."

That was when the governor spoke with Zeidan, the medical staff member said. The medical staff member said he overheard Zeidan telling the governor that no armed group attacked the al-Wahda police station and that police threw two grenades into the cell holding the 44 prisoners, then opened fire on them. Zeidan also told the governor that the men who killed the prisoners broke their arms and legs before throwing the grenades and shooting them so they could not run away, the medical staff member said.

Shortly after the governor's visit, police arrived at the hospital and removed Zeidan, the medic said. "He could have survived. We were treating him for bullet wounds but he was conscious. When they returned his body an hour later, he was dead. He had additional gunshot wounds in his legs and stomach."

The medical staff member said he could not identify the police unit that took Zeidan from the hospital.

The official close to the Diyala governorate said that he and the governor tried to visit the prison the day after the attack to look for evidence of mortar shelling that would support the Diyala police account, but they were unable to enter the prison and did not see any signs of a fight outside the police station.

"Prison guards and other men wearing civilian clothes - we think they're from the [pro-government] militias - prevented us from entering the police station," the official told Human Rights Watch. "They aimed their guns at us and threatened to kill us if we didn't leave."

The official questioned security officials' accounts of how the prisoners died. "Whether mortars were launched or they were killed in crossfire, how is it that so many prisoners died while only one policeman was killed?" he asked. "They came up with a good story, but it raises questions that need to be answered."

On June 19, Reuters reported that the mayor of Baaquba, Abdullah al-Hyali, said he visited the local morgue and saw that most of the prisoners had bullet wounds in their heads, including his nephew. The mayor also told Reuters that his nephew had been "severely tortured and his nails were extracted." Human Rights Watch could not reach the mayor for confirmation.

Police Chief al-Shimmari called the governor's statements politicized:

The governor has a conflict with other parties, and this political pressure made him distort the truth. I explained the facts to the governor but he apparently has political gains to be made by lying.

Police Chief al-Shimmari similarly dismissed the mayor's statements that he saw bullet wounds in the prisoners and that the mayor's nephew was tortured.

Abu Ahmed, a relative of one of victims of the attack, said some of the prisoners killed had been detained for petty crimes but that most had not been charged. He told Human Rights Watch that police arrested his 18-year-old cousin, whose name he asked be kept confidential, two hours before the attack because "someone overheard him mocking Colonel Hooby [the police chief of al-Wahda police station]" earlier that day:

The next morning we were told that all the prisoners in al-Wahda police station were dead. People at the police station told us that the bodies were at the Baaquba Hospital. We went there, and the morgue employees told us that a lot of people died by bullet wounds and some died of fragments from grenades. I saw bullet wounds in [my cousin's] head and chest.

Abu Ahmed attributed the killings to the pro-government Shia militia Asa'ib Ahl al-Haqq, which at least 10 Diyala residents told Human Rights Watch had been "in control of security" in Baaquba

and surrounding areas. He said that the police station is in his neighborhood, Beni Zeid, and that, "Many policemen in that police station ran away after this attack. "I have seen Asa'ib is in the police station," he said, adding that their arsenal included RPG-7 anti-tank grenade launchers.

The Baaquba hospital medical staff member told Human Rights Watch that he and other employees wanted to stop police from taking Zeidan, the wounded survivor, but that the presence of Asa'ib Ahl al-Haqq and other militias in the area made them afraid to do so:

The hospital is protected by a private security company, and we also have a company of local policemen who are supposed to protect the hospital. But they can't really do anything. These are militias we're talking about. Asa'ib could come and put me in a truck and take me to Baghdad whenever they want and there is nothing I can do about it.

The official close to Diyala's government and residents Reuters interviewed said most of the prisoners were being held for petty crimes rather than terrorism-related charges. Some of the prisoners had judicial orders of release, the official said, but the prison continued to hold them because they wanted money from the families to release them.

Jumarkhe: Security forces, Militia Blamed for Killing at Least 45 Local Prisoners

On June 17, the morning after the killings in Baaquba, fleeing pro-government forces set fire to an Iraqi army base outside Jumarkhe, a village about 25 kilometers northeast of Baaquba. Local residents who rushed to the base after the pro-government forces fled found 43 or 44 dead prisoners inside the base, shot execution-style or burned, according to five villagers who saw the bodies, as well as a soldier from the base, a provincial government official, and a provincial human rights activist who interviewed several other residents about the attack.

All the prisoners were Sunnis from nearby villages whom the pro-government forces had rounded up about a week to 10 days earlier, around the time Mosul fell, they said. At least three of those killed were boys about 15 or 16 years old, a villager and the soldier said, while a second villager said he recognized two boys and had heard that a third boy had been killed.

The pro-government forces took two other prisoners with them as they fled the base that morning and killed them on their way out of the village, the soldier said.

The eight sources blamed a combination of Iraqi soldiers, SWAT members, and the pro-government Asa'ib Ahl al-Haqq and Badr Brigades militias for the attack. Local residents told Human Rights Watch that the Badr Brigades had arrived in the area several days before the attack to bolster beleaguered Iraqi army troops during fighting with ISIS.

The government official and the soldier said that all three groups had been controlling the base. The government official added that he was "certain" that the pro-government forces killed the prisoners because "the insurgents did not take over the army base - they just passed through the area."

The morning of June 17, the second day of heavy fighting in Diyala province, villagers noticed smoke and flames coming from the base, one local man told Human Rights Watch. Shortly afterward, two villagers said, Iraq troops and militia fled in military vehicles with white flags, a sign of surrender. But the pro-government forces were shooting as they went, three villagers said. "They were shooting in all directions and destroyed the power station," one said. Two villagers said the gunfire killed a young child.

Local men rushed to the army base, about one kilometer outside of Jumarkhe, hoping to free the prisoners, all those interviewed said.

Human Rights Watch interviewed four men who said they were among the first to enter the prison inside the army base, while part of it was still in flames. Three of them said they were relatives of those killed. The men said they found four prisoners shot in the back of the head and the rest so badly charred that they only recognized them by the few remaining fragments of their clothes. Many of the bodies had been covered with blankets that were also burned, they said. One of the relatives said he saw a barrel of gasoline in one of the areas that had not caught fire.

One of the villagers said of the dead:

Some of them were burned 100 percent. Others of them were still burning and we tried to stop the flames. Some of them were so badly burned that they only weighed about 20 to 40 kilos. We used blankets and planks of wood to carry the bodies out. The bodies were so small from the burning that in some blankets we put two or three bodies.

Three villagers said many of the prisoners had been part of the so-called Awakening Movement, US-funded Sunni coalitions formed in 2006 to protect their neighborhoods, whom Maliki had promised to integrate into the Iraqi security forces but failed to do so. Most had been seized under article 4 of the anti-terrorism law, they said.

One of the villagers who helped carry out the dead told Human Rights Watch that, "Many were ordinary citizens - local farmers and their children."

None of those interviewed knew if the burned men had been shot before being set on fire. They said relatives did not bring the prisoners to medical examiners but instead buried them in their villages.

Rawa: Killings of Prisoners at the al-Jazeera and Badiyya Operations Command Base

On the morning of June 21 in Rawa, a city in Anbar province, Iraqi soldiers killed 25 prisoners before fleeing an attack on their base by armed Sunni militants. Human Rights Watch spoke with one resident of Rawa who said he saw the bodies of the slain detainees inside the prison shortly after they were killed.

The man was fearful for his security and hesitant to speak at length about the case. He said the attack on the prisoners was carried out by members of the al-Jazeera and Badiyya Operations Command, which oversees the Iraqi government's military operations in Anbar. He said the attack took place around 10:30 a.m., shortly before ISIS and other Sunni fighters reportedly took over Rawa. He told Human Rights Watch that after he heard reports from other villagers of an attack by Sunni armed groups on the base, he called an officer he knew at the base who told him that the Iraqi army evacuated the base after "negotiating" their departure with "the armed men."

He said that he and several other men went to the base around 3 p.m. to check on the wellbeing of the prisoners:

When we entered we started hearing moaning and screaming. We followed the sounds of these voices. We reached a cell where we found a pile of dead bodies on the floor. At the beginning we counted 21 dead and seven injured. Another four died on their way to the hospital ... Some of the survivors were beneath the dead; their executioners clearly thought they were all dead.

When I saw the bodies I called back the officer and asked him what happened, why the soldiers killed them. He told me, "All those are terrorists and they deserved it."

The Rawa resident said one of the dead was the driver of Saba`awy Hussein, the brother of the toppled Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein and the former head of general security and police intelligence. "He was initially still alive, but his body was so riddled with bullets. ... We couldn't even do a tourniquet. He died on the way to the hospital."

The man said that one survivor, a 25-year-old Syrian man, told him police killed his five brothers in the attack, including one who was 16.

The Rawa resident said he and the other men who went to the prisoners also identified a 12-year-old boy from Baghdad among the survivors. He said he knew of at least 10 Sunni armed groups fighting in Rawa but that he had not seen the ISIS flag in the city.

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