

Iraq war leaks: No US investigation of many abuses

LONDON – U.S. forces often failed to follow up on credible evidence that Iraqi forces mistreated, tortured and killed their captives as they battled a violent insurgency, according to accounts contained in what was purportedly the largest leak of secret information in U.S. history.

The documents are among nearly 400,000 released Friday by the WikiLeaks website in defiance of Pentagon insistence that the action puts the lives of U.S. troops and their coalition partners at risk.

Although the documents appear to be authentic, their origin could not be independently confirmed, and WikiLeaks declined to offer any details about them. The Pentagon has previously declined to confirm the authenticity of WikiLeaks-released records, but it has employed more than 100 U.S. analysts to review what was previously released and has never indicated that any past WikiLeaks releases were inaccurate.

The 391,831 documents date from the start of 2004 to Jan. 1, 2010, mostly by low-ranking officers in the field. In terse, dry language, they catalog thousands of battles with insurgents and roadside bomb attacks, along with equipment failures and shootings by civilian contractors.

The United States went to war in part to end the brutality of Saddam Hussein's regime, but the WikiLeaks material depicts American officers caught in a complicated and chaotic conflict in which they frequently could do little but report to their superiors when they found evidence that their Iraqi allies were committing their own abuses.

WikiLeaks offered The Associated Press and other news organizations access to a searchable database of redacted versions of the reports three hours prior to its general release Friday. A few news organizations, including the New York Times, Le Monde, The Guardian and Der Spiegel, were given access to the material far earlier.

WikiLeaks describes itself as a public service organization whose mission is to "protect whistle-blowers, journalists and activists who have sensitive materials to communicate to the public." In July, despite objections by the U.S. government, it posted almost 77,000 documents from the Afghan conflict on its website.

Following that release, WikiLeaks editor-in-chief Julian Assange drew controversy for

comments that he wished to expose war crimes. He also became the target of allegations of sexual misconduct in Sweden that he has denied.

The military has a continuing investigation into how the documents were leaked. An Army intelligence analyst stationed in Iraq, Spc. Bradley Manning, has been arrested in connection with the earlier release.

In Friday's release, names and other pieces of identifying information appeared to have been redacted but it was unclear to what extent WikiLeaks withheld names in response to Pentagon concerns that people could become targets of retribution.

Allegations of torture and brutality by Shiite-dominated security forces — mostly against Sunni prisoners — were widely reported during the most violent years of the war when the rival Islamic sects turned on one another in Baghdad and other cities. The leaked documents provide a ground's eye view of abuses as reported by U.S. military personnel to their superiors, and appear to corroborate much of the past reporting. They appeared to mostly be contemporaneous -- routine field accounts that junior officers in units deployed across Iraq sent to headquarters within Iraq during the course of the war.

The leaked documents include at least 300 reports from across Iraq with allegations of abuse. In a typical case from August 2006, filed by the 101st Airborne, U.S. forces discovered a murder suspect who claimed that Iraqi police hung him from the ceiling by handcuffs, tortured him with boiling water and beat him with rods.

The suspect, detained at the Diyala provincial jail, showed evidence of abuse, including bruises on his wrists, back, and knees. The 101st notified the office of Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, and the case was closed, according to the documents.

In another case documented, a group of Iraqi detainees was turned over to American custody so badly injured they had to be hospitalized. The prisoners, whom American forces interviewed and photographed, told the Americans that one had been so badly abused that Iraqi forces may have left him to die.

In those cases as in many others in the documents, U.S. forces did not appear to pursue the matter because there was no allegation that coalition forces were involved. Many reports signed off with: "As coalition forces were not involved in the alleged abuse, no further investigation is necessary."

Other reports describe American attempts to halt abuse by Iraqi officers. Pentagon

press secretary Geoff Morrell, who refused to discuss the documents on Friday, said U.S. troops are required to report any abuses they witness to their superiors and that U.S. policy has been to share that information with the Iraqi government "at the appropriate level."

U.S. diplomats and military commanders in Iraq have said in the past that U.S. and allied military forces in Iraq tried to deter abuse, although U.S. officials do not deny that torture or mistreatment has occurred. As a general policy, U.S. forces in Iraq were supposed to take reasonable action to stop or prevent abuse, and promptly report any incidents they witnessed or discovered.

Some of the reports are laconic, barely a line long: "Individual stated she was beaten and raped for not cooperating with IP (Iraqi police) investigator," one November 2007 report filed from Tikrit said.

Others offer more a more detailed description of the abuse — and evidence.

A U.S. military training team took pictures of the detainee they found covered in welts and bruises near Mosul in November 2007. The man, a member of the oil protection team, said he'd been arrested after discovering a bomb on top of his truck. When the Iraqi army group's commanding officer was confronted, he blamed it on an underling, informing the team that he would arrest the renegade soldier "immediately upon his return from vacation."

A "serious incident report" filed in December 2009 in Tal Afar said U.S. forces had obtained footage of about a dozen Iraqi army soldiers — including a major — executing a detainee. The video showed the bound prisoner being pushed into the street and shot, the Americans said. There was no indication of what happened to the video, or to the Iraqi major or his soldiers. The incident is marked "closed."

The release of the documents comes at a pivotal time for the U.S. in Iraq as the military prepares to withdraw all 50,000 remaining troops from the country by the end of next year. The U.S. military had as many as 170,000 troops in Iraq in 2007.

Violence has declined sharply over the past two years, but near-daily bombings and shootings continue, casting doubt on the ability of Iraqi forces to protect the people.

The situation has been exacerbated by growing frustration among the public over the failure of Iraqi politicians to unite and form a new government. Al-Maliki is struggling to remain in power since his Shiite alliance narrowly lost the March 7 vote to a Sunni-

backed bloc led by rival Ayad Allawi.