

## **Major Fury Over Alleged British Abuses**

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London categorically denies claims that UK soldiers mutilated fighters from southern town.

With an RPG-7 rocket launcher slung over his shoulder, Hussein Abd al-Amir stands in the road leading to the southern town of al-Majar al-Kabir, waiting to avenge the death and alleged mutilation of his brother.

"The British plucked out my brother's eyes, and put them in his trouser pocket," Hussein claimed.

"This was not an easy thing for my tribe," he said. "I had not participated in the resistance, but after this I swore revenge, whatever the price may be. We are waiting for the British."

Hussein's brother Athir is one of approximately 20 residents of this town killed during an ambush staged by local fighters – who reportedly included members of the Mahdi Army – against a British patrol on May 14.

The ambush came at the height of fighting between the radical Shia Mahdi Army militia and Coalition troops.

Although this was only one of dozens of clashes across the south at the time, it left an unprecedented legacy of bitterness.

People of al-Majar al-Kabir believe that at least some of the Iraqi fighters survived the ambush, and were then tortured to death by British forces – claims the latter strongly deny.

Residents of the impoverished town, whose buildings are largely made of clay and palm trunks, say that it has always been hostile to central authority.

At the edge of the city, Kalashnikov rifles, RPGs, Strella anti-aircraft missiles, and other weapons are laid out in one of Iraq's few remaining open-air arms markets.

The town claims thousands of "martyrs" from the Saddam regime.

They include followers of the murdered cleric Mohammed Sadiq al-Sadr, whose son Muqtada leads the Mahdi Army, and guerrillas of the Iraqi Hizbullah who fought the regime's forces from the nearby marshes.

Al-Majar al-Kabir has also resisted foreign occupation.

UK forces have encountered hostility ever since June, when townspeople – reportedly angered by the use of dogs during weapons sweeps of their homes – killed six British troops in an attack on the local police station.

Since the May 14 ambush, lots of locals say that they will attack UK troops on sight.

What happened in the fight is still not entirely clear, but many residents believe that British soldiers intentionally mutilated their relatives.

"The British forces surrounded Mahdi Army fighters after injuring many of them... Some of them were still alive with minor injuries, and they were arrested," claimed Talib Hameed Falah, a farmer who said he witnessed the battle.

The next day, the bodies of 22 locals, who according to some accounts included bystanders and gunmen unaffiliated with the Mahdi Army, were delivered to their relatives from the British army base.

Residents of the town say that some of the bodies showed signs of torture or mutilation.

Dr Adel Karim, a specialist at the nearby al-Sadr hospital in al-Amara who inspected the bodies, said mutilation was the main cause of death for nine of the victims.

"Some of them had their eyes removed, others their ears, and one of them even had his sexual organs cut off, and the cause of his death was bleeding," Karim claimed.

Accounts of mutilation have been propagated by CD-ROMs sold in neighbouring Amara, which purport to show the bodies of the slain fighters being unloaded in the hospital.

It is not clear from the recording whether the injuries depicted came from combat or from deliberate mutilation.

The British defence secretary Geoff Hoon this week dismissed the abuse allegations, but promised that they would be thoroughly investigated.

A British army spokesman in Basra told the London-based Guardian newspaper that the claims were "absurd", insisting they "are an insult to the whole British army and an attempt to stain the image of men who are putting their lives at risk every day to secure Iraq for the Iraqis".

Meanwhile, police in Al-Majar al-Kabir are reluctant to try to calm the volatile atmosphere in the town, fearing residents may turn on them.

"We do not want [trouble from] people," said Hussein al-Bahadli, an officer in the town's main police station. "The policeman is an easy target."

Already, one officer from the area has died in the tense aftermath of the May 14 incident.

Muhammed Ashmani, head of al-Majar al-Kabir police station, was killed in a dispute with Hizbullah leader Abd al-Karim al-Muhammadawi and his brother Riyadh.

According to several eye-witnesses, Riyadh shot Ashmani after the policeman pulled a pistol on his brother during a dispute over whether relatives should be allowed to protest the killings.

Accounts vary as to whether the Hizbullah leader wanted to start a demonstration or prevent one.

Coalition sources say a warrant has been issued for the arrest of the al-Muhammedawi brothers, but residents see little likelihood of it being served.

In the meantime, the case is being negotiated by representatives of the Muhammedawi and Ashmani tribes.

For his part, the Hizbullah leader - a former member of the Iraqi Governing Council - has called for an inquiry into the aftermath of the May 14 ambush.

But no such probe is likely to satisfy relatives of the slain, who want old-style justice.

"He suffered from the British before he died," said porter Muhammad Jasem of his brother Ali, one of alleged victims of mutilation.

"Now we await our brothers, the mujahideen from [the Mahdi Army's headquarters in] Kufa, to launch a full-out attack on the British army," Jasem said.

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