

Merchant of Doom

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Demolitions expert who once sold explosives to fishermen says guerrillas now his best customers.

In a farm overlooking the Euphrates River in the town of Hit, some 200 kilometres west of Baghdad, Fahd (not his real name) sits in his small hut surrounded by bags of TNT.

On the shelves around him are detonator devices, cords, and hand grenades, while the ground is covered with rows of shells for artillery and tanks.

Formerly, this 48-year-old amateur demolitions expert made his living selling bombs to fishermen to use for catching fish.

But he told an IWPR reporter that his best customers now are guerrillas from neighbouring communities.

"The Fallujah resistance [fighters] are my most common customers, and after that mujahideen of Diala [north of Baghdad] who distinguish themselves by planting bombs professionally," said Fahd.

So far, he has not had any buyers from the radical Shiite Mahdi Army, which also has been at war with the Coalition forces.

Fahd has worked in explosives for 12 years, both before the fall of Saddam and after.

At first, his bombs were used to catch fish - but today he has other customers.

"I sell the bombs to the mujahideen, after assembling them and mixing them with even more dangerous materials," Fahd said.

A bomb for the insurgents, he said, comprises four sticks of TNT mixed with gunpowder from hand grenades or artillery shells.

Nails and pieces of iron are the packed around the bomb.

Then the whole thing is wrapped with tape to form a cylinder approximately 30 centimetres high, with the optional addition of a remotely-detonated detonator.

The bombs can then be hidden by the roadside, and detonated from up to 100 metres away as a US patrol passes by.

"The price of one bomb is 20,000 Iraqi dinars (about 15 US dollars) while the price of a TNT stick used for fishing is 750 dinars (about 50 US cents)," he said, adding that a detonator costs another 20,000 dinars.

Local Iraqi police told IWPR they know about the explosives traders, but they claim the bombs are only used for fishing.

"Many Hit residents manufacture bombs, but only for fishing purposes," said Captain Majed Suheil. "It was forbidden under Saddam, but now is permitted until the issuance of new instructions."

Aqil Jabbar is an IWPR trainee.

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