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Iraq: Al-Qaeda Killing Field Found Near Farming Village

By Richard Tomkins

ZAHAMM, IRAQ -- Villagers digging in an abandoned pomegranate orchard in the Diyala River Valley have unearthed the remains of at least 52 people murdered by Al-Qaeda in Iraq during its two-year reign of terror in the area.

The first victim, whose head had been placed at his feet, was found on March 26 by a local village head and a U.S. Army officer who had been given the orchard's location by a man who said he had been kidnapped by Al-Qaeda last August and taken to a "jail" there, but managed to escape before execution.

"Smell that?" Captain Vince Morris, of Iron Company, 3rd Squadron, 2nd Stryker Cavalry Regiment, asked when he approached the orchard on that exploratory visit. No one answered. No one needed to. The gagging stench of rotting flesh was unmistakable. And it was much too strong for the contents of just one grave.

At least 51 additional clumps of remains were uncovered in two, two-hour digs by volunteers from surrounding villages later in the week. The oldest remains were in separate, shallow graves. The freshest remains -- the skeletons still had muscle and flesh holding the bones together -- were in several mass graves, the bodies heaped upon each other. Most were unearthed with their wrists tied behind their backs and with a bullet hole in the skull. Some were covered with a piece of cloth when dumped into the hole; others were not. And then there was the body that was wrapped in plastic.

"The ones in plastic are really bad," a U.S. soldier says. "They're just bags of mush."

Zahamm is a village located about 5 kilometers north of the town of Himbus in Diyala Governorate's "bread basket." When Al-Qaeda declared Diyala Governorate the seat of its so-called Islamic State of Iraq caliphate, the Himbus area became the terrorist group's main training, weapons-storage, and transit area.

No Music, No Smoking

"When they first came into the area they said they were mujahedin fighting the occupation forces. But later they started forcing people from their homes and taking money. People who worked for the Iraq Army or the Iraqi police were punished," says Sheikh Abbas Husayn Khalaf, the leader of Taiyah village.

"They imposed their rules: no music, no smoking, the women had to wear the veil, and there were no wedding celebrations. No one was allowed out after 5 p.m. Some people were shot in front of the people in the street, others were kidnapped, killed, and put in the mass graves."

Sheikh Abbas, sentenced to death by Al-Qaeda for "stirring up people" against them, fled north and hid with relatives, returning to Taiyah only infrequently and surreptitiously. Fourteen people from his village were snatched by Al-Qaeda, he said, including a cousin -- the brother of the man who led soldiers to the killing field.

Last week's excavation sessions only lasted about two hours each. "They're beat. Just look at their faces," Captain Morris, who had helped organize the search and was present to document the finds, says of the volunteers. "I don't think they'll do this much longer today."

His hunch, voiced early in the digging, proved true. The eyes of the volunteers were a mixture of fatigue and trauma -- the horror of Al-Qaeda's rule had revisited them in a particularly brutal fashion. And discarded clothing found nearby -- including children's clothing -- held the promise of things to come.

Only one portion of the orchard -- Al-Qaeda acquired it by killing its Shi'ite owner -- had been excavated, and there were two more orchards nearby that needed to be searched as well.

"If you find them [Al-Qaeda], kill them. Kill all of them," says Karinhi Marzi al-Shumari, an elderly woman from the village of Al-Haruniyah who was watching the disinterment.

The elderly woman said her son, Muhammad Jaber, 42, was taken away by Al-Qaeda last July when he repeatedly refused to join the group.

As she slapped herself, wailed aloud, and raised her hands skyward, other women scoured the field and picked up scattered bits of paper, trying to find information as to what happened to their loved ones.

Those unearthed so far have had proper burials. Villagers cut bed sheets to make shrouds and took the remains by truck to a cemetery.