

Villagers find scores of al-Qaida victims

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U.S. soldiers arrive for a meeting with Iraqis in Laytha, Iraq, an area that was formerly under al-Qaida control. Iraqi volunteers searching what may be al-Qaida's biggest killing field became fatigued and traumatized after just two hours – the horror of al-Qaida'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.

ZAHAMM, Iraq – No less than 52 bodies have been found so far in shallow graves in an area of northern Iraq, the remains of people murdered by al-Qaida during a two-year reign of terror. For the farmers of Diyala province's breadbasket it is a stark reminder of the Islamist group's brutality.

The search began in an abandoned pomegranate orchard on the outskirts of Zahamm last week when U.S. soldiers received information about the killing field by a man who claimed to have escaped from al-Qaida's "jail" there last summer.

Only about one-third of the orchard has been searched so far. Two nearby orchards also believed to be burial grounds will also be searched, raising the prospect that the Zahamm farms could collectively rank as one of the largest al-Qaida killing fields found in Iraq.

Zahamm is about 5 kilometers north of Himbus, which is northeast of Muqtadiya. In 2006, al-Qaida in Iraq (AQI) declared Diyala province the center of its Islamic State of Iraq Caliphate. The Himbus area, with its fruit orchards providing cover from aircraft, became a major weapons storage area and training center.

"When they first came into the area they said they were mujahedin fighting the occupation forces. But later they started making people give them money and forcing them from their homes. People who worked for the Iraqi Army or the Iraqi Police were punished," said Sheikh Abbas Hussein 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 allowed. No one was allowed out after 5 p.m.

"Some people were shot in front of people in the street; others were kidnapped, killed, and put in the mass graves."

One of them was a cousin, he said, the brother of the man who had escaped and told U.S. troops about the graves.

"Smell that?" a U.S. soldier asked as he entered the grove with Sheikh Abbas and an American reporter on an exploratory visit. No one answered. No one needed to. The cloying, gagging stench of rotting flesh was unmistakable. And it was much too strong for the contents of just one grave.

The first shallow grave found by soldiers and the sheikh contained the remains of a man dead for some time. There was no flesh on the bones. The head, wrapped in a traditional headdress, was at its feet. The skull fell apart when touched, except for the almost mummified-looking face.

"I will contact the muktars [leaders] in the other villages," Sheikh Abbas said. "I'll tell them what we found."

Twenty-eight graves were found the next day by the sheikh and a handful of village volunteers. Their contents were left in place for later disinterment.

On Thursday, with a U.S. military escort, more than 100 volunteers from 10 villages near Himbus descended on the orchard with shovels and white bed sheets from which to make shrouds.

After only a few minutes of digging the loud talk among the men who had broken into groups became low murmurs. The only other sounds heard were shovels digging into earth, people vomiting from the stench that spread like a greasy cloud, and quiet discussions on how best to extricate the remains.

AQI had wrapped some victims in plastic or cloth before burying them. Others did without. Some had clearly been dismembered and the remains placed in separate sacks.

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

The majority of those unearthed had not been decapitated. They had been bound and shot in the back of the head. The cords that bound their wrists were still there. Many skulls still had the blindfolds over the eye sockets.

It was difficult to tell how long a body had been in the ground. Some lacked all flesh; others were still decomposing. One man in a police uniform may have died just before U.S. forces pushed into the breadbasket in early January - there was body mass and flesh still on the bones holding them together, and his facial features were distinct, locked in a grimace.

Two hours of digging disinterred the original 29 bodies and at least eight more. At least 14 more were discovered and excavated Saturday during a brief two hours of digging by 40 volunteers.

"At least" is the operative phrase. Some graves contained the remains of more than one person, but with decomposition still in progress and an inordinate amount of bones entangled in pieces of clothing moistened by decaying flesh it was sometimes hard to tell how many were in the hole and no one was game to try to disentangle the mess.

In one deep grave found Saturday were five bodies. In another, three, but when they were removed there were lines in the earth hinting at more remains deeper down.

Volunteers, most without gloves, jumped into the holes and put the remains in pieces of cloth cut from the bed sheets. These remains were later hauled out to a road, placed on trucks and taken to the cemetery for proper burial.

"When you find them [al-Qaida] kill them. Kill them all," said Kareemhiya Marzi al-Shumari, an elderly woman from the village of Haruniya.

Kareemhiya said her son Muhammad Jaber, 42, was taken away by al-Qaida last July after he repeatedly refused to join them.

As men dug Saturday she went from excavation site to excavation site, slapping her face in grief, crying loudly and lifting her hands skywards. Several other women were with her, and picked up pieces of paper scattered in the orchard in the hope of finding something, anything that would give a clue if their loved ones were moldering amid the dead pomegranate vines and dry earth.

The orchard, one volunteer said, had belonged to a Shiite farmer. Al-Qaida requisitioned it by killing him and driving his family away.

"They're beat. Just look at their faces," Capt. Vince Morris, who had helped organize the search and was present to document the finds, said of the volunteers. "I don't think they'll do this much longer today."

His hunch, voiced on Thursday proved true; also on Saturday. The eyes of the volunteers were a mixture of fatigue and trauma after just two hours each day – the horror of al-Qaida's rule had revisited them in a particularly brutal fashion. And the discarded clothing found nearby – including children's clothing – held the promise of things to come.

Digging is expected to continue for weeks. It's spring in Iraq and time to clean the fields. This year, however, clean up will mean more than just pulling weeds and clearing irrigation ditches.