



Military's Killing of 2 Journalists in Iraq Detailed in New Book

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A new book by a Washington Post reporter provides a graphic, second-by-second description of the U.S. military's 2007 killing of two Reuters journalists in Baghdad, an incident that the news organization says it cannot investigate fully because the Pentagon has withheld key records of the event.

The Reuters photographer and driver were carrying cameras and walking with a group of Iraqi men, some of whom appeared to be armed, when a U.S. helicopter crew mistook them for insurgents, according to an account by David Finkel in the book "The Good Soldiers," published Tuesday.

Reuters has been pressing the U.S. military for more than two years to turn over all materials containing information about the shootings on July 12, 2007, of its staff photographer Namir Noor-Eldeen, 22, and driver Saeed Chmagh, 40, in the helicopter strike in a contested neighborhood of East Baghdad.

"We continue to have questions whether or not the actions taken by the soldiers in the area that led to the deaths of the two Reuters journalists were necessary and appropriate," Reuters chief counsel Thomas Kim said. "My goal is to understand the basis on which the military concluded that the shooting was justified."

Sixteen journalists have been killed by U.S. military fire in Iraq, leading to calls by Reuters and groups such as the Committee to Protect Journalists for the Pentagon to undertake timely and thorough investigations of each case and make them public.

But the U.S. military has withheld key information on the 2007 shootings on the grounds that it is classified, and has not released to Reuters a video taken from the gunship that captures the complete sequence of radio communications and imagery that unfolded on the streets below.

That recording appears to form the basis for a description of the incident in one chapter of the book, about a U.S. infantry unit in Baghdad.

According to Finkel's account, Noor-Eldeen and Chmagh arrived in Baghdad's east Al-Amin neighborhood during a morning of clashes between insurgents and the U.S. military. Working independently and without the knowledge of the U.S. ground unit or Apache crews operating in the area, Noor-Eldeen and Chmagh were walking along a street with seven other Iraqi men, two of whom appeared to be holding a rifle and a grenade launcher. The photographer and driver initially were both carrying cameras, which the Apache crew mistook for weapons.

After crew members gained permission to fire and circled a building that blocked their view, they flew the Apache in for the attack, Finkel wrote.

"Light 'em all up."

One second before the first burst, Noor-Eldeen glanced up at the Apache.

"Come on -- fire."

The others followed the gaze and looked up, too.

The gunner fired.

Seven of the nine men in the group began to fall, but Noor-Eldeen and Chmagh managed to run away, according to Finkel. The gunner tracked Noor-Eldeen as he fled into a pile of trash and fired three more bursts with the cannon, killing him as he could be seen trying to stand in a cloud of dust.

Chmagh was wounded and began trying to push himself up on his knees and crawl away, but could move only a few inches. The crew saw that Chmagh was alive, but initially did not shoot him because he was unarmed. However, when a van drove up and two men tried to pick up Chmagh, the crew requested permission to fire and received it. The gunner opened fire, killing Chmagh and the two men, and injuring two children who were inside the van.

Soon after the shootings, Reuters submitted a request under the Freedom of Information Act for all documents and materials about the incident, Kim said. In April, the U.S. Central Command, which oversees the U.S. military in Iraq, said it had identified eight documents but was withholding two because they were classified and released six others in redacted form, with classified portions blacked out.

Reuters appealed in June, saying the information the military released was incomplete, challenging the decision to classify it and asking for an expedited decision. In July, the Pentagon rejected the request to expedite the appeal, Kim said. He said one of the documents released contains grainy photographs that appear to be captured from a helicopter video, which Reuters is seeking to obtain.

"It's difficult to understand whether the investigation is coming to sound conclusions without actually seeing the evidence," he said. "It is hard to make heads or tails out of the screen grabs from the video, so we would like to see the video . . . the actual unedited version of what happened on the scene."

Frank Smyth, the journalist security coordinator for the CPJ, said the U.S. military has not made public several other investigations involving the deaths of journalists killed by U.S. forces, and said that more transparency is important both for accountability and for preventing such incidents in the future.

"This case is one of quite a few, more than 10 at least, where journalists have been killed by U.S. fire in Iraq and it has not been investigated in a public way," Smyth said. "Once we have information, judgments can be made on whether they were justified."

Pentagon spokesman Bryan Whitman said U.S. military personnel have repeatedly met with news managers in recent years to discuss safety issues, and U.S. commanders also have taken measures to remind troops of the presence of reporters on the battlefield. "We think the safest way to cover these operations is to be embedded with U.S. forces," he said.

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