

ECONOMY & POLITICS

Iraq casualty-data flaw?

Retaliatory killings are undercounted, some officials claim

By Ellen Knickmeyer

THE WASHINGTON POST

BAGHDAD, Iraq—Days after the bombing of a Shiite shrine unleashed a wave of retaliatory killings of Sunnis, the leading Shiite party in Iraq's governing coalition directed the Health Ministry to stop tabulating execution-style shootings, a ministry official familiar with the recording of deaths said.

The official said a representative of the Shiite party, the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq, ordered government hospitals and morgues to catalog deaths caused by bombings or clashes with insurgents, but not by execution-style shootings.

A statement this week by the United Nations human-rights department in Baghdad appeared to support the account of the Health Ministry official. The agency said it had received information about Baghdad's main morgue—where victims of fatal shootings are taken—indicating “the current acting director is under pressure by the Interior Ministry in order not to reveal



The Feb. 22 bombing of the Askariya mosque in Samarra, a Shiite shrine, set off a wave of retaliatory violence against Sunnis.

consistencies in their accounts appeared to call the government's tally into question.

In addition to the morgue worker, three people—the Health Ministry official, an official with the Interior Ministry and an international official in Baghdad—involved in tallying or monitoring the mounting deaths also have put the toll at 1,000 or more, though none gave a toll as high as 1,300. Two of the three said pressure by Shiite leaders not to report execution-style

very unlikely, very strange, that some political official would come and impose their own views on this ministry,” said Qasim Yahiya, a spokesman for the Health Ministry.

Haitham al-Husseini, a spokesman for SCIRI, said: “How can SCIRI put pressure on authorities or on people? I don't expect you can believe such a thing. How can SCIRI go to a ministry and give instruction to an official to do this or that?”

Execution-style killings of the kind frequently blamed on police or Shiite militias allied with the gov-

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REPUBLICANS ACT to dodge Dubai ports damage.

Congressional Democrats had hoped to use 45-day review hammering Bush's party, with nonincumbent candidates trumpeting port security from even state legislative and city council posts. House strategists say Republican challenger Ralph Norman in South Carolina, simply by remaining open to possibility of approving deal, hurt chances of unseating Democratic incumbent Spratt.

But aggressive Republican criticism of Bush tempered their candidates' exposure. “Democrats' cherry-picking one issue to demagogue does not make up for their weakness on national security,” says Brian Nick of Senate Republicans' campaign committee. Even U.S. business community shied away, only belatedly defending the deal.

Americans have “xenophobic reaction” to global economy, complains Port of Seattle's Mick Shultz, but “don't want to give up \$1.98 underwear at Wal-Mart.”

ADMINISTRATION SEES smoother sailing on India nu-

the offer, insists the giant retailer may have bigger plans.

CHERTOFF CAUTIONS congressional critics not to break up troubled Homeland Security Department.

He insists bringing order to the massive agency will take time, just as the Pentagon took years to overcome interservice rivalries. Sens. Lott of Mississippi and Clinton of New York are among lawmakers in both parties proposing to restore

FEMA's independence from Chertoff's department.

PENSION PLAN: House and Senate negotiators have begun merging pension-overhaul bills, with Sen. Enzi of Wyoming predicting a vote on final version by April 7. Among the remaining disputed issues: clarifying legal status of so-called hybrid pension plans, and overhauling multiemployer plans in unionized industries.

GETTING LOST in immigration-bill details, Senate Judiciary Committee members rely so heavily on staffers'

such information and to minimize the number of casualties."

The U.N. office said it hadn't confirmed the information about the morgue and had been unable to obtain an accounting of the toll from Iraqi authorities.

Spokesmen for the Health Ministry and the Supreme Council—commonly known by its initials, SCIRI—denied any order to alter the tabulation of deaths had been issued.

Abductions and killings of Sunni Arab men have occurred with increasing frequency this past year and are widely blamed on government-allied Shiite religious militias and death squads alleged to be operating from inside the SCIRI-dominated Interior Ministry. Shiite militias have been accused of abducting and executing large numbers of Sunni men in the days after the Feb. 22 destruction of the Askariya mosque, a Shiite shrine in the northern city of Samarra.

After a lull in recent days, abductions and killings flared again in Baghdad on Wednesday. Police in west Baghdad found a minibus that contained the bodies of 18 bound and strangled men, and 50 employees of an Iraqi security firm were kidnapped on the east side of the city.

The Washington Post reported on Feb. 28 that more than 1,300 shooting victims had been brought to the morgue during the first six days after the Samarra bombing. The figure was provided by a morgue worker.

Prime Minister Ibrahim al-Jafari denied the account, saying Shiite-Sunni violence had claimed 379 lives in the week following the attack on the shrine. Gen. George W. Casey Jr., the U.S. commander in Iraq, called the Washington Post's report exaggerated and inaccurate. An email sent to U.S. military officials this week seeking updated casualty figures went unanswered.

In the past week, various government ministries declined to give a breakdown of the 379 total, or said they were unable to, and several in-

shootings had produced the lower death toll announced by Mr. Jafari.

The international official said "Ministry of Health types" were reckoning about 1,000 deaths before Mr. Jafari issued his denial. "By February 28th, even the 1st, that was the number being floated, almost acknowledged" publicly, the international official said, referring to March 1. "Then the government announced" its lower figure.

Morgue authorities now say only 250 bodies were received from Feb. 22 to Feb. 28. That breaks down to about 35 bodies a day, scarcely more than the daily average of roughly 30 corpses reported since the middle of last year. It is unclear how, or whether, the government includes execution-style militia killings in the tally.

Iraqi officials denied death figures had been manipulated. "I find it

smoother sailing on India nuclear agreement—but when?

Shiite militias allied with the government appear to be killing more Iraqis than bombings of government and civilian targets by Sunni Arab insurgents.

The Health Ministry official said more than 1,000 people died in the first six days of violence, although it wasn't clear whether that covered only Baghdad or all of Iraq.

At least one representative of SCIRI traveled to the Health Ministry, according to the ministry official. On or about Feb. 27, the ministry official said, a party representative directed ministry employees that victims of sectarian killings not associated with insurgent attacks no longer should be recorded. Their names were only to be posted on the morgue wall so their families could retrieve their bodies.

Contacted a second time this week, the ministry official refused to speak further, saying, "Forget what I told you."

China goes on the offensive in war of words over rights

ASSOCIATED PRESS

BEIJING—China lashed out at the U.S. for criticizing its human-rights record, denouncing the U.S. for what it called rampant violence and widespread discrimination against minorities, especially blacks.

In its annual response to the U.S. State Department's report on human rights world-wide, the State Council, China's cabinet, also criticized American troops over treatment of prisoners in Iraq and the detention camp for terror suspects at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba.

The response came a day after the U.S. State Department's report said repression worsened in China in 2005, with "increased harassment, detention, and imprisonment" of people seen as threats to the government. It also mentioned tighter media controls and censorship of online content.

Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Qin Gang said China's progress in human rights "not only met with the satisfaction of the Chinese people but also has been widely affirmed by the international community."

Also Thursday, a group of Chinese academics published their own study on human rights in the country, saying the leadership had made progress but needed to do more.

The report by the Open Constitution Initiative, posted online, cited expanded public welfare and the abolition of taxes on farm production as signs of progress. Courts also have been repealing death sentences while the use of torture to produce confessions is slowly being reduced, the report said.

However, it faulted the regime for tightening restrictions on free speech and religious freedom.

rely so heavily on staffers' whispered instructions that chairman Specter likens them

White House touts the deal's economic benefits, relying on backing from U.S. Chamber and Indian-American campaign donors. To counter criticism that it undercuts nonproliferation efforts, Bush and Secretary of State Rice personally court Senate Foreign Relations Committee Chairman Lugar in advance of hearings as early as next month.

House Republicans, eager to avoid "rubber stamp" attacks from Democrats, vow to press White House for details. "In the end I see it going through," a top House aide says, but Senate counterparts are wary.

"It will be bumpy," a top Senate predicts, and "quite possibly not [approved] this year."

GRASSLEY MANEUVERS to head off China trade sanctions.

Republican Sen. Graham of South Carolina and Democrat Schumer of New York press on with new proposed tariffs on Beijing. But Finance Chairman Grassley of Iowa, backed by Bush aides, hopes to sidetrack their bill with a "constructive approach" that opposes duties.

Instead, Grassley backs stricter enforcement of existing trade rules. He teams with House Republican English of Pennsylvania, who pledges to "send a very strong message to all our trading partners."

Bush aides hope to douse attacks on Beijing before next month's visit by Chinese President Hu.

WAL-MART BATTLES opposition from community banks to its bid for Utah bank charter.

Arguing it will process only back-office transactions, Wal-Mart counters critics with trade-press ads inviting commercial banks to operate inside its stores. American Bankers Association's Floyd Stoner, skeptical of

Humorist Andy Borowitz declares, 'Avian Flu Now More Popular Than Bush.'

to ventriloquist dummy Charlie McCarthy.

Democratic Feingold of Wisconsin, whose amendment was being debated, complains of "filibuster by professed confusion."

BOEHNER MOVES to increase budget-cut pressure on Congress.

New Republican majority leader, seeking to make his mark after succeeding DeLay, seeks repeat of last year's effort to curb entitlement spending through so-called reconciliation bill. He proposed offering such legislation every year.

"Forcing an annual process ... would help deal with the budget deficit," says the Ohio Republican. His plan tracks efforts by Bush and other Republican lawmakers to lift election-year enthusiasm among party's conservative base with calls for presidential line-item veto.

But some Republicans have already fled new proposed White House cuts, including lump-sum Social Security death benefit.

MINOR MEMOS: Chicago's Second City comedy revue mourns passing of Sesame Street's Big Bird—to avian flu. ... Noting Bush's falling poll numbers, online humorist Andy Borowitz declares, "Avian Flu Now More Popular Than Bush."

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