

US troop deaths in Iraq set yearly record

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The toll of US soldiers killed in Iraq reached 853 this week, making 2007 the deadliest year for US forces since the 2003 invasion. A total of 3,856 US troops have died during the occupation of the Persian Gulf state. Forces of US coalition allies have suffered another 297 deaths.

Five soldiers died Monday in incidents involving Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs). Both attacks took place in Northern Iraq in Kirkuk province near the oil-refining city of Baiji. In one of the attacks four soldiers were killed when an IED went off near their vehicle.

Another soldier was killed in western Anbar province. A seventh serviceman, a sailor, was killed in an explosion in Salahuddin province north of Baghdad.

With nearly two months remaining in 2007, US troop deaths in Iraq are set to far exceed the 850 killed in 2004, the highest previous annual total. That year saw clashes with Shiite militiamen in Najaf in August and the bloody US campaign against Fallujah in November.

US troop strength in Iraq stands at 165,000, an increase of nearly 30,000 since the start of the so-called surge earlier this year. April, May and June each recorded more than 100 US soldiers killed. The toll of 126 troop deaths in May was the third highest during the course of the occupation.

Iraqi deaths rose in October to at least 887, according to government figures, compared to 840 reported deaths in September. An unofficial count by the Iraqi Health Ministry put the October toll at 1,448, including bodies that were dumped without identification. The vast majority of those killed were civilians, victims of US attacks and sectarian violence. This total undoubtedly understates the number of casualties since the ability of Iraqi authorities to collect data is very limited and many deaths go unreported.

On Monday insurgents killed an Iraqi Finance Ministry official in an ambush west of Baghdad, a

school headmistress was shot and Iraqi police reported finding four unidentified bodies in Baghdad.

The US death toll of 39 in October was the lowest monthly count in two years. It compared to 65 in September and 85 in August. The reported monthly toll of Iraqi deaths has also declined since reaching a high of some 2,800 in January. This has led some US military officials to talk about an improving security situation in Iraq.

A US military spokesman attributed the decline in IED attacks to US pressure on Iran, which it claims has halted the shipment of bomb-making materials to Iraq. Iran denies sending aid to Iraqi insurgents.

In August Shiite cleric Moqtada al-Sadr ordered his Mahdi Army Militia to “freeze” its activities for six months.

While attacks on US troops and sectarian killings may have fallen in recent months, the decline appears to be mainly limited to the Baghdad area, where US troop concentrations are the highest. Outside Baghdad conditions have improved little. In comments reported in the *Washington Post* Basim Hamdi, a Shiite merchant from Balad, a city some 50 miles north of Baghdad, described a “sectarian fire.” “The security situation in Balad is so bad compared with last year,” he said. “No one can go outside the city except for emergencies, and no Sunni can get in.”

Violence in Northern Iraq is increasing. Once the quietest region in the country, tensions are on the rise as a result of Turkey’s threat to attack Kurdish insurgents. The northern oil center of Kirkuk has witnessed a surge in bombings and shootings as a deadline approaches for holding a controversial referendum that would incorporate the ethnically mixed city into Iraq’s Kurdistan region.

Meanwhile, conditions are not improving for the millions of Iraqis turned into refugees by the invasion and occupation. The number of displaced Iraqis has

increased catastrophically since the beginning of the year. According to the Iraqi Red Crescent Society, the number of internally displaced Iraqis grew by 16 percent to 2,299,425 in September. That compares to less than one-half million at the beginning of 2007.

According to the report, 83 percent of those displaced are women and children under the age of 12. The report, based on figures collected by Red Crescent volunteers in 18 provinces, said, "In addition to their plight as being displaced, the majority suffers from disease, poverty and malnutrition. Children do not attend schools and are being sheltered in tents, abandoned government buildings with no water or electricity, mosques, churches, or with relatives." Most of the displaced are in 16 camps within Baghdad province.

The report noted that the recent Turkish shelling along the northern Iraq border forced thousands of villagers to flee their homes, compounding the refugee problem.

In addition, more than 2 million have fled Iraq, including a large proportion of the country's more highly trained professionals. The influx of Iraqis fleeing violence into neighboring countries threatens to further destabilize the region. About 1.2 million refugees are in Syria alone, severely straining that country's already limited resources.

Some cite the massive displacement of Iraqi people as one factor in the recent reported decrease in sectarian killings. According to a number of reports, ethnic cleansing operations have largely succeeded in creating segregated neighborhoods, particularly in Baghdad, making it more difficult to conduct further cleansing.



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