

## **Data Shows Faster-Rising Death Toll Among Iraqi Civilians**

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BAGHDAD, Iraq - Iraqi civilians and police officers died at a rate of more than 800 a month between August and May, according to figures released in June by the Interior Ministry.

In response to questions from The New York Times, the ministry said that 8,175 Iraqis were killed by insurgents in the 10 months that ended May 31. The ministry did not give detailed figures for the months before August 2004, nor did it provide a breakdown of the figures, which do not include either Iraqi soldiers or civilians killed during American military operations.

While the figures were not broken down month by month, it has been clear since the government of Prime Minister Ibrahim al-Jaafari took over after the Jan. 30 election that the insurgency is taking an increasing toll, killing Iraqi civilians and security workers at a faster rate.

In June the interior minister, Bayan Jabr, told reporters that insurgents had killed about 12,000 Iraqis since the start of the American occupation - a figure officials have emphasized is approximate - an average monthly toll of about 500.

The issue of civilian deaths in Iraq has been a delicate one, with some contending that the Bush administration and the Pentagon have deliberately avoided body counts to deprive their critics of a potent argument against the war. Estimates have ranged from the 12,000 offered by Mr. Jabr to as many as 100,000 in a widely reported study last year. The new figures are likely to add to that debate.

The figures, released by e-mail through an American official after multiple requests, are a significant milestone, for while the Iraqi government tallies Iraqi deaths, figures on the overall totals have been tightly guarded. But the numbers do not account for civilian deaths caused by American and Iraqi soldiers in military offensives, at checkpoints or on raids.

"It's an important number, it's a big deal," said Marc Garlasco, senior military analyst at Human Rights Watch in New York. "It shows the toll Iraqi civilians are paying for their freedoms."

Obtaining tallies of Iraqi dead has always been difficult, in part because they have not always been compiled systematically. For some time after the 2003 invasion, the Health Ministry released daily counts that were cobbled together mostly from figures provided by hospitals. But last year, when the numbers began to rise, the ministry stopped releasing even those tallies publicly, and provided classified copies to the government.

Last summer, the Interior Ministry took over responsibility for tracking the deaths, according to a ministry official who oversees statistics. The official, Waleed Khalil, said that before August

2004, the figures came in haphazardly on scraps of paper, and that a large portion had been what he called "dark numbers," approximate counts of all the deaths.

Where the Health Ministry figures covered only hospitals and morgues, the Interior Ministry's system is far more comprehensive, Mr. Khalil said, although he declined to be more specific.

In another set of figures provided to The New York Times, officials in the communications office of the Iraqi cabinet gave a breakdown of the deaths by Iraqi province, and by gender and age. These figures, compiled by the Health Ministry and provided in an e-mail message, are far lower than those given by the Interior Ministry because they come only from hospitals.

They show that about 32 percent of the 3,853 deaths the ministry listed for the six months ending on April 5 occurred in Baghdad. The second highest number of deaths was in Anbar, a largely Sunni Arab province of about 1.2 million people that has formed the heart of the resistance to the American occupation. The third highest was in Najaf, the Shiite holy city in the south that has been the site of frequent insurgent attacks and American military operations against a firebrand cleric twice last year. Children accounted for 211 of the total deaths.

In per capita terms, the highest death rates were in Anbar, Najaf and Diyala Provinces.

In all, the ministry listed 15,517 wounded in the same period. Of that figure, men made up the overwhelming majority, at 91 percent of the total. Cities in the northern Kurdish enclave were not included in the count.

Insurgent attacks claim the overwhelming majority of Iraqi lives now. In the two months after the Shiite-led government was announced, insurgents killed more than 1,500 Iraqis, a number approaching the total of American troops killed since the start of the war two years ago.

Even attacks with small death counts tear through the lives of many people. A suicide car bomb at a military checkpoint on June 19 in Tikrit killed Alaa Bahnam Shamoun, 28, who was delivering sodas and lunch with his brother, Qusay. The brothers' truck was rear ended, and when Mr. Shamoun got out to speak with the driver the man blew himself up. Qusay survived, but suffered severe burns on his face and torso. He had married just 28 days before.

When Mr. Shamoun's wife saw him in a hospital in Baghdad, she barely recognized him. The family did not tell him his brother was dead, and they changed out of black mourning clothes into bright colors every time they visited him in the hospital.

"I'm still in my honeymoon and I have this," Mr. Shamoun's wife, Noha Rafail, 21, said outside his hospital room. "This is the life we have."

Deaths at the hands of Americans are statistically fewer, but far from uncommon.

On June 25, a 21-year-old engineering student was shot dead during a house raid by marines in Anbar Province. The student, Muhammad Summaidai, answered the door and was excited to practice his English, according to an account by his cousin, Samir Summaidai, the Iraqi

Ambassador to the United Nations. The marines took him to a back room to see the family's weapons. A short time later he was dead, shot through the neck in what his family says was a murder by the marines.

["The Americans have to be smarter - to hide and lay traps for the insurgents," Mr. Summaidai said by telephone in early July. "Not just to terrorize the community. That will not work."]

The marines said in a statement shortly after the incident that they were investigating.

One day earlier Yasser Salihee, an Iraqi employee of the Knight Ridder newspaper chain, was shot and killed by an American sniper while he was on his way to a gas station, Knight Ridder said. That death is also under investigation.

"We monitor the deaths of civilians the best way we can," a military spokesman in Baghdad, Lt. Col. Steven Boylan, said in an e-mail message. But he added: "We do not have the ability to get accurate data. We do not have visibility all over Iraq in every location."

Poor security has been a major obstacle to accurate counts. Human Rights Watch conducted a tally of Iraqis killed by American soldiers in Baghdad in 2003 but has been stymied in its efforts to count fatalities in any other area because of the risks of moving around Iraq, officials at the organization said. As a result, they said, a lot of incidents go unreported.

"It's an access issue," said Joe Stork, deputy director of the Middle East Division of Human Rights Watch. "Being able to get to a place like Tal Afar," in northern Iraq near the Syrian border, "is just very difficult now."

The debate over casualties has been fraught with politics and wildly different figures. Last fall, a team of researchers from the United States and Iraq concluded that about 100,000 Iraqis had died as a result of the American invasion. The researchers reached their finding by studying a few neighborhoods in detail and extrapolating the results to the entire country.

The study was seized upon by opponents of the war as proof that military action had done more harm than good. Others criticized its conclusion as exaggerated.

Another count is provided by the American-based nonprofit group, Iraq Body Count, which compiles figures for the dead from media reports. Its most recent tally, which includes Iraqis who died in the 2003 war, put the total at 22,787.

Layla Isitfan contributed reporting for this article.