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Syria: USA must investigate reports of killing of civilians

Amnesty International is calling on the US authorities to investigate reports that a cross-border raid from Iraq into Syria by US forces on Sunday killed eight civilians, including one child, in a village east of Damascus, and to disclose whether prisoners were taken during the attack, as one report suggests.

The Syrian authorities say that at least eight people were killed and others were injured when, just before 5pm on 26 October, US forces attacked a “civilian building under construction” at a farm in the village of al-Sukkariyah near the town of al-Bukamal, located in Syria some eight kilometres from the country’s border with Iraq. They say those killed included five members of the same family, a father and his four sons, the youngest aged 16.

Eyewitnesses from the village are reported to have told journalists who visited the scene that a group of US soldiers landed in two helicopters, entered the building under construction and shot dead seven construction workers inside. The soldiers were reported to have then moved to a nearby tent in which the building’s guard resided with his family and opened fire into it, killing him and seriously injuring his wife. One eyewitness is reported to have alleged that at least two people were taken away as prisoners by the US troops, but no claim to this effect has been made by the Syrian authorities or other sources.

US officials, speaking to the press on condition of anonymity, are reported to have said that the attack was directed at the compound of a network that smuggles fighters into Iraq, carried out as part of the US government’s “expansive definition of self-defence”. The anonymous sources also claim that a suspected prominent leader of al-Qa’ida and other “fighters” associated with him were killed but not civilians. Official US government spokespersons at the Pentagon and State Department, however, have declined to date to comment on the attack.

The Iraqi authorities initially appeared to condone the raid as being aimed against insurgents who infiltrate Iraq, but then on 28 October condemned the assault, declaring that they had opened an investigation into the incident and that they intended to share the findings with the Syrian authorities.

While Amnesty International welcomes the announcement of the investigation by the Iraqi authorities, it urges the US authorities to open immediately a thorough and independent investigation to determine whether its forces respected relevant rules of international humanitarian law and international human rights law. These provide that civilians must never be targeted and must be protected at all times from reckless and disproportionate force. Such an investigation should be conducted urgently and its full findings should be publicly disclosed. Anyone reasonably suspected of having committed a serious violation should be brought to justice in proceedings that conform to international fair trial standards.

Amnesty International is also calling on the US authorities to disclose whether prisoners were taken during the attack and, if so, to divulge their number and identities and their present whereabouts and legal status.