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Search For Father Ended Only When TV News Showed Images Of Abuse

By Catherine Philp, in Baghdad

ALHAM HAMZA was sitting on the sofa watching the evening news when the latest photograph of the Abu Ghraib abuses appeared on the screen, the picture of a smiling young American woman bending over the dead body of a man, her thumb stuck jauntily in the air.

As she stared, her blood ran cold. She recognised the dead man instantly, despite bruises and bandaging obscuring his face. As the image faded from the screen, she turned to her teenage daughter, still absorbed in the school books she was reading.

"Hajar, that is your father," Alham said as the tears began to run down her face. "He's sleeping. He used to sleep in exactly that way."

For seven months since he was taken from his house in a raid by American soldiers, Munadel al-Jumeili's family had been searching for him, visiting every American detention centre and contacting human rights groups to find out where he was being held.

It was only a little more than a fortnight ago, when the pictures of the battered body came out in the flood of images of the Abu Ghraib torture scandal, that the family discovered that Munadel had been dead all along.

Now the family wants some answers : Why was he taken in the first place? Why was he so badly mistreated that it led to his death? Why was it only by accident that they ever discovered his fate?

"They are animals that did this, taking these photographs," Majid, his brother, told *The Times* yesterday. "But if they hadn't done it, we would never have known what happened to him. I believe the Americans wanted to cover this up so we would never know what they had done."

Munadel was seized from his house in Mehmoudiyah, south of Baghdad, at 2am on November 3. Thirty men in the area were arrested that night, on a tip-off by an unknown informant who accompanied the soldiers on a raid looking for insurgents.

His family insist that he had nothing to do with the insurgency and that no weapons were found at the house. "He couldn't have fought anyway, his legs were disabled from his injuries during the Iran-Iraq War," Majid said. "He couldn't even kneel to pray."

The family stayed awake until daylight, too terrified to sleep. In the morning their neighbour Jalal Khalil came by. He too had been detained in the raid but was released in the morning as a case of mistaken identity. He told the family that Munadel had been taken to Abu Ghraib. "He said the beatings had begun as soon as they were herded into the helicopter," Alham recalled, "and that those who were held at Abu

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Ghraib were being beaten still.”

When his brothers went to Abu Ghraib looking for him, however, they were told he was no longer there. His brothers said they never gave up hope that he was still alive; lately, however, his sister became less sure.

“For months I believed he was alive,” she said. “But when I saw the first pictures of the other prisoners at Abu Ghraib, it occurred to me that he might already be dead. I knew he would rather die than be made to do such things.”

In fact he was dead long before. When the family tracked down his body to the central mortuary in Baghdad, where it had lain since the American military handed it over in February, they were handed a military death certificate stating his time of death as 22.45, November 4, 2003, just a day after he was arrested. Under cause of death, there is just one word: pending.

Unsatisfied, Majid obtained a court order from an Iraqi judge calling for a new post-mortem examination to be performed. The mortuary, however, refused.

“They said they got the body from the Americans so they needed their permission and the permission of the Red Cross,” Majid said. But the Red Cross no longer have a presence in Iraq after their offices were bombed and he was told the process could take months. “We had waited long enough,” he said. “We had no choice but to take him home.”

No information on Munadel’s death has been publicly released but leaked papers from a continuing Pentagon investigation have revealed that he died during an interrogation by CIA agents after being beaten up in the showers.

An e-mail from one of the guards awaiting trial suggests that military medics tried to cover up the nature of his death by packing his body in ice and taking it away with a fake intravenous drip in his arm. Nobody has told the al-Jumeili family this, though. Other inmates trickling out of Abu Ghraib said that Munadel had been particularly badly treated because he had resisted attempts to make him break his Ramadan fast by eating, and had refused to say Christian prayers or remove his clothing. The other prisoners exhorted the family to be proud.

On Friday they laid their brother and husband to rest in a martyr’s funeral. But their ordeal is far from over.

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