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Abuse Suspected In Iraqi General's Death

After stating last year that the man had died of a heart attack during interrogation, the Pentagon has ruled it a homicide.

By Monte Morin and Alissa J. Rubin, Times Staff Writers

BAGHDAD — American soldiers hauled the black, zippered bag from their Humvee and carried it to the hospital's morgue, just as they had done on "many" other occasions, an Iraqi doctor said.

Peeling open the rubber sheath, a physician found the bruised, corpulent body of a middle-aged man, an incision in his chest and belly sutured like the hide of a baseball. A paper from the U.S. military was attached, stating that the man, an Iraqi, had died of a myocardial infarction — a heart attack.

"There was no way for us to know if that's how he really died," Hamdi Alusi, a doctor at Qaim General Hospital in western Iraq, said Saturday. "Because the body was already dissected, we couldn't do any autopsy.... As far as we are concerned, the cause of death is still unknown."

For months, the death of Maj. Gen. Abed Hamed Mowhoush, 57, remained a painful mystery to his family and friends and a closely guarded secret of the U.S. military.

Suspicious Arise

Last week, the Pentagon disclosed that the death of the high-ranking Baathist on Nov. 26 was a homicide, a disclosure that has fueled suspicions that he died at the hands of military interrogators.

According to a U.S. military death certificate dated Dec. 2 and released Friday, Mowhoush died of "asphyxia due to smothering and chest compression."

The CIA considered Mowhoush a "high-value detainee." As a leader in Iraqi President Saddam Hussein's military, he commanded troops in Basra, where the Republican Guard and the Fedayeen Saddam militia put up one of the toughest fights during the coalition invasion. After surrendering to U.S. forces last year, Mowhoush, who was described at the time as an Iraqi air defense general, was detained at a U.S. military base near the Syrian border for questioning.

By the time the interrogations had ended, Mowhoush was dead. The U.S. military said the general had died of natural causes.

"Mowhoush said he didn't feel well and subsequently lost consciousness," read a statement by the military. "The soldier questioning him found no pulse, then conducted CPR and called for medical authorities."

A surgeon failed to revive Mowhoush, the military said.

Family's Account

But the general's family refused to believe the account, saying he was in good health before he was taken to a location called Tiger Base. Rumors swirled. Some said he was injected with an unknown substance that stopped his heart. Mowhoush's sons, who were also detained for weeks, said they believed he died from mental torture.

Iraqis who were detained with Mowhoush told the sons that before their father died, interrogators marched their younger brother, Mohammed, into the interview room with Mowhoush and threatened to kill the 15-year-old boy. They say the boy was then taken outside, where a soldier fired two bullets into the air, simulating his execution.

"Then they showed my father blood, blood that was clotted on the floor. They told him it came from Mohammed," Arkan Abd Hamad, 25, a son of the general, said before the Pentagon's disclosures. "It was then that he died of a heart attack.... Such was his mental condition."

The documents released by the Pentagon on Friday suggest a different scenario, one matching neither the military's initial explanation nor the account given by the family or fellow detainees based in part on the military explanation.

The death certificate released Friday gave few details of Mowhoush's death beyond the specific findings, but other detainees at the base have told reporters that they were sometimes swaddled in blankets with large barrels of water placed on their chests, and that plastic bags were placed over their heads until they began to choke.

A report in the Denver Post last week cited Pentagon documents that said interrogators slid Mowhoush into a sleeping bag, with only his feet exposed, and rolled him repeatedly. Then, according to the report, one of the soldiers sat on his chest and covered his mouth.

The U.S. military has denied that it has tortured detainees.

"Any suggestion that torture is used is false and offensive," said Brig. Gen. Mark Kimmitt, spokesman for the U.S.-led coalition forces, discussing the military's general policy.

A Soldier's Soldier

Although he was a high-ranking Baathist, Iraqis interviewed by The Times described him as a soldier's soldier.

If he got into a disagreement, "he always solved it man to man, he didn't get others involved," said Jawad Dainy, 61, an Iraqi lieutenant general who attended the Iraqi Military Academy with Mowhoush.

A big man who loved to eat and socialize, Mowhoush came from a family of Bedouins, shepherds and farmers. He was the first person in his family to get a professional education, and, Dainy said, he was preoccupied with supporting the two wives and nine children of his brother, who had died in the Iran-Iraq

war in the 1980s.

Dainy was indebted to him as well. He said Mowhoush helped when his cousin deserted from the army and faced a harsh prison sentence. Mowhoush intervened, and the man was spared.

"He did it with complete generosity and then asked me to have lunch with him," Dainy said. "God rest his soul."

Not long after Mowhoush died, his family filed suit in an Iraqi court, demanding that the circumstances of his death be made public and that the family be compensated. The suit has been postponed until Iraq gains sovereignty.

"No amount of compensation will bring our father back to us," said Abd Hamid Husam, 27, one of Mowhoush's sons. "The real compensation is to know what happened and for the guilty ones to be punished."

But the truth has been difficult to determine. Among the factors complicating inquiries has been the manner in which U.S. military authorities have identified the general, based on hereditary names. In military and Iraqi reports, he has been referred to as Mowhoush, Mowhosh, Almahlawi and Mahawish.

In addition, U.S. military authorities have not shared death certificates with Iraqi doctors. Alusi, the doctor at the hospital where Mowhoush was examined, said the case was one of several that had struck doctors as odd.

Last month, Alusi said, soldiers delivered an unidentified teenage male to the hospital. The doctor suspected torture, but he could do nothing, he said. "He was brought in and we couldn't even identify him because of severe hemorrhaging and disfigurement of his face," the doctor said. "All we can do is bury him, and that is what we did."

Still, Mowhoush's relatives say they won't stop pursuing the matter. The sons say that they were also brutalized in custody and that they will never forget the moment soldiers called on them to inform them that their father was dead.

"We know the American people don't have anything to do with this and don't want to hurt us," Hamad said. "When my father was killed, even one of the American soldiers came to us and hugged us and started to cry. Not all are bad. Just some are."

Special correspondent Caesar Ahmed in Baghdad contributed to this report.