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US soldier removed from Iraq for shooting at Quran

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BAGHDAD -- An American sniper was removed from [Iraq](#) after he used a copy of the Quran for target practice, the military said Sunday, a day after a U.S. commander held a formal ceremony apologizing to Sunni tribal leaders.

The elaborate ceremony _ in which one U.S. officer kissed a new copy of Islam's holy book before giving it to the tribal leaders _ reflected the military's eagerness to stave off anger among Sunni Arabs it has been cultivating as allies.

The tribesmen have become key in the fight against al-Qaida in Iraq militants, who depict the American forces as anti-Islamic occupiers. One anti-U.S. Iraqi Sunni group condemned the Quran shooting, calling it "a hideous act." Similar perceived insults to Islam have triggered protests throughout the Muslim world.

Iraqi police found the bullet-riddled Quran with graffiti inside the cover on a firing range near a police station in Radwaniyah, a former insurgent stronghold west of Baghdad, U.S. military spokesman Col. Bill Buckner said.

American commanders launched an inquiry that led to disciplinary action against the unidentified soldier, who has been removed from Iraq, Buckner said.

Members of the local U.S.-allied group said the Quran was found with 14 bullet holes in a field after U.S. troops withdrew from a base in the area.

Sheik Ahmed Khudayer al-Janabi, a local tribal leader, said the group had planned a protest march last Thursday but called it off under pressure from U.S. forces and to prevent any insurgent violence as retaliation.

The incident, which occurred on May 9 and was discovered two days later, was first reported by CNN, which broadcast a ceremony at which the top American commander in Baghdad apologized to tribal leaders Saturday in Radwaniyah. The military confirmed the details Sunday in an e-mailed response to a query.

"I come before you here seeking your forgiveness," Maj. Gen. Jeffery Hammond was quoted as saying at the ceremony. "In the most humble manner I look in your eyes today and I say please forgive me and my soldiers."

"The actions of one soldier were nothing more than criminal behavior," he added. "I've come to this land to protect you, to support you _ not to harm you _ and the behavior of this soldier was nothing short of wrong and unacceptable."

The commander also read a letter of apology by the shooter, who has not been identified, while another military official kissed a Quran and presented it to the tribal leaders, according to CNN.

Tribal leaders, dignitaries and local security officials attended the ceremony, while protesters carried banners and chanted slogans, including "Yes, yes to the Quran" and "America out, out."

The military statement called the incident "serious and deeply troubling" but stressed it was the result of one soldier's actions and "not representative of the professionalism of our soldiers or the respect they have for all faiths."

The hard-line Association of Muslim Scholars condemned the shooting and what it said was a belated acknowledgment of the incident, calling it "a hideous act against the book of almighty God and the constitution of the nation and the source of its glory and dignity."

The alliances between Sunni tribes and U.S. forces have been key to a steep decline in violence over the past year. But the Quran incident was the latest in a series of setbacks, including the accidental killings of U.S.-allied fighters, that have raised concerns about the fragility of the support for the American forces.

U.S. troops also have struggled to overcome the perception that they are insensitive to Islamic traditions after several missteps in the early stages of the war in Iraq.

Sheik Eid Majid al-Zubaie, the preacher at the Radwaniyah mosque, said local leaders were outraged over the discovery of the Quran, which he said was shot through and had big dark X's and other graffiti on the pages. But he said they had accepted the military's apology.

"There is not any difference between this soldier and the figure in Denmark who made the caricature drawings against the Prophet Muhammad," al-Zubaie said. "But they apologized and expelled the soldier."

Separately, relatives mourned the deaths of at least five children killed when mortar shells slammed into a neighborhood while they were playing outside in a predominantly Shiite area on the eastern outskirts of Baghdad on Saturday.

Bandaged girls and boys with bloodstained clothes cried as they were packed two to a bed at the hospital to which they were taken in the Shiite stronghold of Sadr City.

Mortar rounds struck a house, an open area and a street where boys were playing soccer in the Maamil neighborhood on Baghdad's northeastern outskirts, witnesses said.

Nadim Jabir, 33, said he lost his 4-year-old son Abbas, and that his wife and 10-year-old daughter were wounded when their mud-brick house was hit.

"My wife was panicked and ran out with my three children," he said, adding he ran after them but was thrown to the ground by the force of another blast.

"When the dust settled, I saw my only boy Abbas lying on the ground with many other kids. All were groaning and some kids were missing limbs. Abbas was hit in his head," he said.

Residents said four other children were killed. Police and hospital officials also reported a man was killed and at least 30 people were wounded.

The mortar strikes occurred as sporadic fighting continues between Shiite militiamen and U.S.-Iraqi forces despite a peace deal reached with followers of radical cleric Muqtada al-Sadr last week.

An American soldier also was killed Sunday by a roadside bomb that hit his vehicle north of Baghdad, raising to at least 4,080 the number of U.S. service members who have died since the Iraq war began in March 2003, according to an Associated Press count.

Associated Press writer Bushra Juhi contributed to this report.

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