

Mobile Labs to Target Iraqis for Death

"A war fighter needs to know one of three things: Do I let him go? Keep him? Or shoot him on the spot?"

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Global Research, December 16, 2007

consortiumnews.com 16 December 2007

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U.S. forces in Iraq soon will be equipped with high-tech equipment that will let them process an Iraqi's biometric data in minutes and help American soldiers decide whether they should execute the person or not, according to its inventor.

"A war fighter needs to know one of three things: Do I let him go? Keep him? Or shoot him on the spot?" Pentagon weapons designer Anh Duong told the Washington Post for a feature on how this 47-year-old former Vietnamese refugee and mother of four rose to become a top U.S. bomb-maker.

Though Duong is best known for designing high-explosives used to destroy hardened targets, she also supervised the Joint Expeditionary Forensics Facilities project, known as a "lab in a box" for analyzing biometric data, such as iris scans and fingerprints, that have been collected on more than one million Iraqis.

The labs – collapsible, 20-by-20-foot units each with a generator and a satellite link to a biometric data base in West Virginia – will let U.S. forces cross-check data in the field against information collected previously that can be used to identify insurgents. These labs are expected to be deployed across Iraq in early 2008.

Duong said the next step will be to shrink the lab to the size of a "backpack" so soldiers who encounter a suspect "could find out within minutes" if he's on a terrorist watch list and should be killed.

Duong justified this biometric-data program as a humanitarian way of singling out "bad guys" for elimination while sparing innocent civilians.

"I don't want My Lai in Iraq," Duong said. "The biggest difficulty in the global war on terror – just like in Vietnam – is to know who the bad guys are. How do we make sure we don't kill innocents?"

In Iraq and Afghanistan, U.S. military units already are operating under loose rules of engagement that allow them to kill individuals who are identified as suspected terrorists or who show the slightest evidence of being insurgents. American forces also have rounded up tens of thousands of Iraqi military-age males, or MAMs, for detention.

During a summer 2007 trip to Iraq, Anthony Cordesman, a military analyst at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, was briefed on U.S. plans to expand the number of Iraqis in American detention by the end of 2008.

“The detainees have risen to over 18,000 and are projected to hit 30,000 (by the U.S. command) by the end of the year and 50,000 by the end of 2008,” Cordesman wrote in his [trip report](#).

The sweeps have enabled the U.S. military to collect biometric data for future use if and when the Iraqis are released back into the general population.

Test Tube

In effect, the Bush administration is transforming Iraq into a test tube for modern techniques of repression, which already include use of night-vision optics on drone aircraft, heat resonance imaging, and firepower that is both deadly and precise.

The new techniques represent a modernization of tactics used in other counterinsurgencies, such as in Vietnam in the 1960s and in Central America in the 1980s.

In Vietnam, U.S. forces planted sensors along infiltration routes for targeting bombing runs against North Vietnamese troops. In Guatemala, security forces were equipped with early laptop computers for use in identifying suspected subversives who would be dragged off buses and summarily executed.

Now, modern technologies are updating these strategies for the 21st century’s “war on terror.”

The U.S. news media mostly has reacted to these developments with gee-whiz enthusiasm, like the Post story about Duong, which breezily depicts her complicated life as a devoted mom whose personal history as a Vietnamese refugee led her to a career developing sophisticated weapons for the U.S. government.

The Post feature article expressed no alarm and no criticism of Duong’s comment about shooting Iraqi suspects “on the spot.” [[Washington Post, Dec. 1, 2007](#)]

Similarly, U.S. newspapers have consigned stories about U.S. troops engaging in extrajudicial killings of suspects mostly to pages deep inside the newspapers or have covered the news sympathetically. While some harsh criticism has fallen on trigger-happy Blackwater “security contractors,” U.S. troops have been given largely a free pass.

For instance, no furor arose this fall when the U.S. military, in effect, endorsed claims by members of elite Army sniper units that they have been granted broad discretion in killing any Iraqi who crosses the path of their rifle scopes.

On Nov. 8, a U.S. military jury at Camp Liberty in Iraq acquitted the leader of an Army sniper team in the killings of three Iraqi men south of Baghdad during the early days of the troop “surge” this year.

Staff Sgt. Michael Hensley was found not guilty of murder, though he was convicted of lesser charges that he had planted an AK-47 rifle on one of the dead men and had shown disrespect to a superior officer.

In an e-mail interview with the New York Times, Hensley complained that he should not have even faced a court martial because he was following guidance from two superior officers

who wanted him to boost the unit's kill count.

"Every last man we killed was a confirmed terrorist," Hensley wrote. "We were praised when bad guys died. We were upbraided when bad guys did not die." [[NYT, Nov. 9, 2007](#)]

Asymmetric Warfare

The case of Army sniper Jorge G. Sandoval Jr., who served under Hensley, also revealed a classified program in which the Pentagon's Asymmetric Warfare Group encouraged U.S. military snipers in Iraq to drop "bait" – such as electrical cords and ammunition – and then shoot Iraqis who pick up the items, according to evidence in the Sandoval case. [[Washington Post, Sept. 24, 2007](#)]

(Like Hensley, Sandoval was acquitted of murder but convicted of a lesser charge, the planting of copper wire on one of the slain Iraqis to make it look as if the dead man were involved in making explosive devices.)

Another case of a targeted killing of a suspected insurgent surfaced at a military court hearing at Fort Bragg, North Carolina, in mid-September. Two U.S. Special Forces soldiers took part in the execution of an Afghani who was suspected of heading an insurgent group.

As described at the hearing, Staffel and Anderson were leading a team of Afghan soldiers when an informant told them where a suspected insurgent leader was hiding. The U.S.-led contingent found a man believed to be Nawab Buntangyar walking outside his compound near the village of Hasan Kheyl.

While the Americans kept their distance out of fear the suspect might be wearing a suicide vest, the man was questioned about his name and the Americans checked his description against a list from the Combined Joint Special Operations Task Force Afghanistan, known as "the kill-or-capture list."

Concluding that the man was insurgent leader Nawab Buntangyar, Staffel gave the order to shoot, and Anderson – from a distance of about 100 yards away – fired a bullet through the man's head, killing him instantly.

The soldiers viewed the killing as "a textbook example of a classified mission completed in accordance with the American rules of engagement," the International Herald Tribune reported. "The men said such rules allowed them to kill Buntangyar, whom the American military had designated a terrorist cell leader, once they positively identified him." [[IHT, Sept. 17, 2007](#)]

According to evidence at the Fort Bragg proceedings, an earlier Army investigation had cleared the two soldiers because they had been operating under "rules of engagement" that empowered them to kill individuals who have been designated "enemy combatants," even if the targets were unarmed and presented no visible threat.

In effect, Duong's mobile labs would streamline the process for identifying suspected insurgents like Buntangyar.

Rather than relying on physical descriptions, U.S. forces could scan a suspect's eyes or check his fingerprints — and instantaneously cross-check it with data stored in West Virginia — before deciding, in Duong's words, "Do I let him go? Keep him? Or shoot him on the

spot?"

Robert Parry broke many of the Iran-Contra stories in the 1980s for the Associated Press and Newsweek. His latest book, Neck Deep: The Disastrous Presidency of George W. Bush, was written with two of his sons, Sam and Nat, and can be ordered at neckdeepbook.com. His two previous books, Secrecy & Privilege: The Rise of the Bush Dynasty from Watergate to Iraq and Lost History: Contras, Cocaine, the Press & 'Project Truth' are also available there. Or go to Amazon.com.

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