



US soldier accused of murdering Iraqi in pre-trial hearing

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CAMP SPEICHER, Iraq (AFP) — A pre-trial hearing was held on Saturday for a US soldier charged with murdering an Iraqi detainee by shooting him and then burning him with an incendiary grenade, in the latest scandal to rock the military in Iraq.

Staff Sergeant Hal Warner from Oklahoma has been charged along with First Lieutenant Michael Behenna with the premeditated murder of Ali Mansur Mohammed, as well as assault, making a false official statement and obstruction of justice.

Mohammed was killed after he was detained by the two soldiers in May.

The hearing for Warner, who is on his second deployment to Iraq, was held at Camp Speicher, a US base near executed dictator Saddam Hussein's hometown of Tikrit.

Behenna's hearing is set for September 20.

The charges against the pair follow a criminal investigation into the death of Mohammed, a detainee initially believed to have been released by coalition forces on or about May 16.

An AFP correspondent at Camp Speicher said that Warner was accused of arresting Mohammed at his house in Tikrit on May 5, and of beating him up.

According to the prosecution, Mohammed had been expected to be freed on May 16 and dropped off at a checkpoint manned by local members of a group fighting Al-Qaeda, but that the soldiers kept him in captivity.

According to the charges, on May 16 Warner and Behenna shot Mohammed and later set his body on fire in the back of a military vehicle by using a thermite grenade which burns fiercely but does not explode.

The grenade was placed under Mohammed's head.

Warner, 34, appeared to be under stress as the charges were read at the hearing, the AFP correspondent reported.

The hearing opened at 9:30 am (0630 GMT). The first witness, a local police officer, said Mohammed's body was found in a tunnel under a bridge on May 17.

The body was naked, partly burnt on the head and lying in a pool of blood, the officer said, adding

that the body was still warm when he found it.

Four more witnesses testified, including US soldiers and an Iraqi doctor.

The incident occurred near the oil refinery town of Baiji where the soldiers' D Company, 1st Battalion is based.

The US military has been rocked by a series of scandals in Iraq, including the notorious Abu Ghraib scandal in 2004 and several allegations of rape or murder.

The most serious allegations of unlawful killings came when a group of marines were accused of murdering 24 Iraqi civilians in the town of Haditha in November 2005 after a roadside bomb killed a comrade.

A total of eight marines were charged the following year, but most of them have either been acquitted or had charges withdrawn before court martial.

In June, charges against a US marine officer accused of failing to properly investigate the deaths of the civilians were also dismissed.

Lieutenant Colonel Jeffrey Chessani was the highest-ranking officer to face criminal charges following the killings, but walked free after a hearing at Camp Pendleton, California.

Prosecutors alleged that many of the victims were unarmed civilians, including women and children.

The Marine Corps said in a press release issued after the deaths that 15 Iraqis had died in the roadside bombing that killed the marine.

But a subsequent investigation by Time magazine found that most of the dead were killed as marines swept through three houses near the scene of the bombing, prompting a wide-ranging internal investigation.

The killings in Haditha are the most serious allegations of war crimes levelled against US forces since the 2003 invasion that toppled Saddam Hussein.