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Iraqi Death Toll Exceeded 34,000 in 2006, U.N. Says

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BAGHDAD, Jan. 16 — The [United Nations](#) reported Tuesday that more than 34,000 Iraqis were killed in violence last year, a figure that represents the first comprehensive annual count of civilian deaths and a vivid measure of the failure of the Iraqi government and American military to provide security.

The report was the first attempt at hand-counting individual deaths for an entire year. It was compiled using reports from morgues, hospitals and municipal authorities across [Iraq](#), and was nearly three times higher than an estimate for 2006 compiled from Iraqi ministry tallies by The Associated Press earlier this month.

Numbers of civilian deaths have become the central indicator for the trajectory of the war, and are extremely delicate for both Iraqi and American officials. Both follow the tallies, but neither will release them.

An Iraqi government spokesman called the count exaggerated, and said that it had been obtained using “incorrect sources.” Though the government closely tracks deaths through the Interior and Health Ministries, he said it did not have a system in place for compiling a comprehensive figure.

Despite the criticism from the Iraqi government, the United Nations said it used only official sources, most of which relied on counts of death certificates. A vast majority of Iraqi deaths are registered, at least to local authorities, so that Iraqis can prove inheritance and receive government compensation. Some deaths still go unreported, however, and the United Nations tally may in fact be lower than the true number of deaths nationwide.

As death tolls have risen, the lack of security has become the single most important barrier to success of the American enterprise here. The numbers of dead, at least at the Baghdad morgue, are running at double their number in 2005.

Underscoring the challenge, even as the United Nations released its figure — 34,452 deaths, a number that does not yet include the December totals from all provinces — at least 70 more Iraqis were killed on Tuesday when a series of bomb blasts struck a largely Shiite university in northeast Baghdad.

After almost four years of war, in which Americans have focused largely on fighting an elusive enemy — Sunni militants and, more recently, Shiite death squads — military commanders say keeping Iraqis alive has now moved to the center of the new strategy proposed by President Bush.

For many Iraqis, the pledge comes too late. The numbers reported by the United Nations were more than tenfold the number of American deaths for the entire war. As previous attempts to secure Baghdad have failed, tens of thousands of middle-class Iraqis have given up and fled the country. Those who remain are becoming increasingly radicalized as the violence draws them into a cycle of revenge.

The United Nations report said an average of 94 Iraqis died every day in 2006, with about half the deaths occurring in the capital. A majority died from gunshot wounds, in execution-style killings that are a common method for death squads, both Sunni and Shiite. The report registered the most lethal month as October, with deaths declining slightly in November and December.

Violence between Sunnis and Shiites, virtually unheard of in the early years of the war, has become the main driver of the tallies.

Military commanders have acknowledged that they underestimated the seriousness of the sectarian killings, which took off after the bombing of a Shiite shrine in Samarra

last year drew Shiites into the war. Before that, Sunni militants did most of the killing. Now, the capital is mired in violence, as the two groups fight bitterly over territory.

In the shootings, bodies surface days later in sewers and garbage dumps. The report said that most unidentified bodies were found in six neighborhoods of Baghdad, three Sunni — Dora, Rashidiya and Adhamiya — and three Shiite — Sadr City, New Baghdad and the hardscrabble slum of Shuala.

“It’s important to identify the root cause of the violence,” said Gianni Magazzeni, chief of the United Nations Assistance Mission to Iraq’s Human Rights Office, which compiled the report. “Lack of accountability for crimes generates the urge for justice through armed groups.”

One result, described by the report, is a society in collapse. At least 470,094 Iraqis have fled their homes since February. The number of displaced Iraqis was the highest in the embattled Sunni province of Anbar, where 10,105 families fled, followed by Karbala in the south, Baghdad, and Dohuk in the north.

Iraqi government forces also suffered painful losses. The report cited an Interior Ministry figure of 12,000 Iraqi security forces killed, both the Army and the police, since 2003.

The general breakdown in order has led to a wave of crime, and many of the killings were part of that.

“This law and order vacuum has an encouraging effect on criminal groups of various affiliations, many of whom use the Internet, mobile phone messaging systems, videos and pamphlets to promote their criminal activities,” the report said.

The Iraqis most tormented by the violence are those least able to protect themselves against it: the poor. Um Qasim, a Baghdad cleaning lady, has lost three brothers, a

sister-in-law, a nephew, a stepson and a son, all in the past three years. Two of her other sons are in jail in the northern city of Mosul for playing minor roles in a kidnapping arranged by her brother.

Her life improved in a brief but joyous spurt immediately after the invasion. During the looting that followed, her family stole pieces of metal and bricks to build a solid roof and second story on their modest house.

But her life quickly unraveled as two of her sons, looking for money, got involved in a kidnapping and got caught. Another son, just 16 years old, was killed by Sunni extremists not far from their house near Haifa Street, a poor, mostly Sunni area that has been the scene of intense fighting in recent weeks.

Ms. Qasim works several jobs cleaning affluent homes; she takes minivans around the city to get to work. Under [Saddam Hussein](#), her main worry was how to feed her family. Now it is how to keep them alive.

“I never thought that one day I would have to think about how to keep them alive,” she said. “Now, when I go out of my house in the morning, I pray to God that when I return, I will see all of them there alive.”

The violence has expanded to the point of leaving hospitals and morgues overflowing with bodies. The report described the discovery of several recent mass graves. In the southern city of Najaf, one grave was shallow, with bodies partly visible, and local people asked authorities to dig it up to protect children in the area. In Baquba, north of Baghdad, 28 bodies were found of members of the Shimari tribe, who had been kidnapped and killed.

In Baghdad, where dozens of broken bodies turn up daily, the most feared site is on the edge of Sadr City, the largest Shiite enclave in northeastern Baghdad. Bodies are dumped in pre-prepared holes in the area, called al-Sadda, the report said.

“The area is considered very dangerous and controlled by the militias,” it said. “No one, including Iraqi security forces, can visit the area without authorization of the militias.”

The report also provided details on the outcomes of a number of mass kidnappings that tormented Iraqis throughout the fall. The attacks seem to be a signature of Shiite militias.

Around 70 Iraqis, almost all Sunnis, are still missing after being kidnapped in November from the Ministry of Higher Education in downtown Baghdad. The attack took place on a day when teachers from the Sunni areas of Anbar, Salahuddin and Mosul were visiting.

The kidnappings have completely redrawn the composition of neighborhoods. Sinek, a wholesale market in the heart of Baghdad, once thoroughly mixed, is slowly emptying of Sunnis. Men in uniforms seized around 50 merchants on Dec. 2. About 29 were later released. All were Shiite.