WASHINGTON -- The chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff yesterday defended the U.S. military's use of cluster munitions in Iraq, saying only 26 of the devices, which shower "bomblets" over a target, fell in civilian areas and that there was only one case of death or injury to a non-combatant.

Air Force Gen. Richard B. Myers, the nation's top uniformed military officer, did not provide any details on that single case. His remarks came amid persistent reports from Baghdad that children and other civilians are being killed or maimed by bomblets that didn't explode when they hit their initial targets but did when people stumbled across them later.

"Coalition forces used cluster munitions in very specific cases against valid military targets, and only when they deemed it was a military necessity," Myers said.

He said about 1,500 cluster bombs were used in the war, and the 26 dropped in populated areas were aimed at military targets the Iraqi regime placed near civilians.

Myers acknowledged that "in some cases we hit those targets knowing that there would be a chance of potential collateral damage," using a military term for civilian casualties. But he stressed that "the regime chose to put many of these military assets in populated areas and then, from those areas, fired on our forces."

Myers' assertions were challenged by human rights organizations, which said they had learned of new injuries to civilians in Baghdad and other Iraqi cities yesterday.

Weapons experts also said Myers' remarks are somewhat misleading because his account of the U.S. military's use of cluster bombs does not cover similar weapons dispersed by rockets and ground artillery. Because they aren't dropped from airplanes, these weapons are not considered "cluster bombs" in Pentagon parlance, the experts said. Even so, they added, the weapons have a similar effect and, in many cases, higher "dud rates."

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