

US forces rounding up Iraqi civilians

International condemnation of Guantanamo Bay plan

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Confronting mass resistance by Iraq's people, US forces have begun rounding Iraqi civilians on the flimsiest of pretexts. More than 300 men and women in civilian clothes have already been detained, and on April 1 the Pentagon issued far-reaching guidelines authorizing troops to arrest civilians who "interfere with mission accomplishment" and hold them for up to 30 days. President Bush also authorized soldiers to use teargas in Iraq—this a likely preparation for subduing civilian unrest.

Some of the civilians have been detained simply for appearing to be well-fed, according to interviews given by US officers to American newspapers.

Military officers have declared that such detainees are likely to be labeled as "terrorists" or "unlawful combatants," denied prisoner-of-war status under the Geneva Conventions and shipped off to the illegal detention and interrogation camp at the US naval base at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba.

Amnesty International and other human rights groups have condemned the plan, whereby Iraqi prisoners would join 660 detainees from Afghanistan who are being held indefinitely without trial in tiny isolation cells in violation of the Geneva Conventions.

The civilian roundup marks a new stage in a war of terror being conducted against the Iraqi population. From the statements made by senior US officers to the *Washington Post* and the *San Jose Mercury News*, the new Rules of Engagement for detaining Iraqi civilians are reminiscent of the methods employed by the Nazi military in the Warsaw Ghetto.

Having caused widespread hunger and thirst by cutting off food and water supplies and laying siege to Iraqi cities, the Pentagon has given Allied soldiers a green light to capture—or kill—anyone who appears able bodied and well fed.

According to the *Mercury News*: "Two US officers said the decision to detain suspicious civilians came after Marines began noticing young, well-fed civilians with military boots, short haircuts and nice watches dawdling in unusual places.... Troops from 15th Marine Expeditionary Unit first noticed them in the southeastern port of Umm Qasr, and later the Marines of Task Force Tarawa saw them in An-Nasiriyah."

The newspaper said the roundup of suspect civilians signaled a change in the Pentagon's Rules of Engagement (ROE) for the Iraq campaign. "All this nice guy ROE, that's going out the

window," one senior Marine officer told the *Mercury News*. "We're going to have to expand the ROE a bit."

The Pentagon has prohibited "embedded" reporters from describing the ROE. But Lieutenant Colonel Scott E. Rutter, commander of the 2nd Battalion, 7th Infantry Regiment, whose soldiers died in a recent suicide bomb attack, characterized the new rules for opening fire on civilians as follows: "Five seconds. They have five seconds to turn around and get out of here. If they're there in five seconds, they're dead."

The report in the *Washington Post* was not much different. "Seeing young, healthy males in the middle of a firefight makes you wonder what they're doing there," a senior officer told the newspaper. "They're the only well-fed Iraqis in the area."

"These are bad guys and it would be insane to let them roam the battlefield," the unnamed officer said.

The *Post* said the roundups were "part of a shift to unconventional warfare by US commanders" in response to hit-and-run attacks launched by Fedayeen and Baath Party militias on overstretched US supply lines. US officers declared that the guerrilla tactics adopted by the militias and their supporters had left the US-British forces with no choice but to change the rules of the war.

In recent days, President Bush, Defense Secretary Rumsfeld and Pentagon officials have sought to justify the civilian roundups by demonizing Iraqi resistance fighters as "death squads," "terror squads," "terror cells" and members of "terroristic behaving organizations". The American media—and soldiers in the field—have been fed unsubstantiated rumors about civilians being used as "human shields" and American soldiers being tortured and executed.

While a Pentagon official said "there currently is no plan" to send Iraqi detainees to Cuba, civilian "suspects" are already being segregated from Iraqi prisoners of war. Officers said they would be treated like POWs, "but without official status," until a hearing was held under Article 5 of the Geneva Conventions to determine their status.

Any who were determined to have violated the international covenants of war would be declared illegal combatants and sent to Guantanamo Bay or other holding facilities, to be detained with Al Qaeda and Taliban fighters captured in Afghanistan, military officers said. "That guy's going to get the full

treatment,” a senior officer said.

While the officer said military lawyers were trying to decide how to hold the hearings—“we’re still figuring this out, because we thought we’d have mass surrenders, not this crap”—any summary military hearing will violate Article 5 of the Convention. It specifies that disputed status must be determined by a “competent tribunal.”

Contrary to reports in the US media, Article 5 does not state that military personnel lose their POW rights if they are not in uniform. In fact, Article 4 of the Convention defines POWs to include “members of militias or volunteer corps forming part of armed forces” as well as “organized resistance movements” and inhabitants who “spontaneously take up arms to resist invading forces, without having had time to form themselves into regular armed units.”

Newspapers in London have reported that British generals are furiously opposing the US plan because it will undermine their war propaganda. “They fear it will shatter any attempt to convince the Iraqi people that the coalition is a liberating army,” the *Mirror* reported. “They also fear Iraqis, faced with a choice between ‘winning, death or Guantanamo Bay’, will fight harder against coalition forces.”

Reflecting these concerns, the British government has declared its preference for abiding by the Geneva Conventions, while confirming that Iraqi “paramilitaries” are being segregated from POWs and could be sent to Guantanamo Bay. Air Marshal Brian Burridge, commander of the British forces in Qatar, has said he would prefer plainclothes fighters, paramilitaries and Fedayeen to be prosecuted for war crimes, possibly through the new International Criminal Court (ICC). The obvious difficulty with that proposal is that Washington refuses to recognize the authority of the ICC.

A spokesman for the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) confirmed that anyone captured in a war zone, whether in military uniform or civilian clothes, had to be treated as a POW under the Geneva Conventions. He said that paramilitaries had the same rights under the Conventions and should be identified as POWs so that they could be formally registered and interviewed by the ICRC.

The ICRC has started to register the more than 8,300 Iraqis being held as POWs by the US and Britain, starting with a camp holding 3,000 prisoners near the southern town of Umm Qasr. In line with its standard practice, the ICRC will not comment publicly on the treatment or conditions of detention, but there are other indications that Iraqi detainees are being mistreated and interrogated, in breach of the Conventions.

Television footage Monday showed prisoners being roughly bundled into trucks, hooded and handcuffed like the Guantanamo Bay detainees. A *USA Today* reporter on the spot observed prisoners being manhandled, humiliated and taunted:

“The Marines put gray hoods over the Iraqis’ heads and herded them together. Guards wearing rubber gloves bound the prisoners’ hands behind their backs with plastic packing

ribbon, clasped numbered identification tags to their shirts and led them to the trucks...

“It was easy Monday to imagine the blinded prisoners fearing execution as they were led to the trucks. Some were forced to kneel while trucks were prepared. Some of their hands trembled from either morning chill or fear...

“About one of every 10 prisoners in Monday’s group wore camouflage, a signal to the Marines that they might be members of President Saddam Hussein’s Republican Guard. Their minders threw the camouflaged POWs on their bellies into the back of the trucks, sat on them, then quickly tied their feet with more plastic packing ribbon.

“‘Move over,’ one guard barked from a truck bed, using his boot to nudge his prisoners into a tight row. ‘You comfortable?’ another guard mocked to prisoners who knew little if any English. ‘Do you need anything? Maybe some beer and peanuts?’

“There wasn’t time to interrogate this crew, so they’ll be questioned at length when they arrive at the larger holding area.”

This last reference suggests that prisoners are being interrogated for protracted periods, in violation of Articles 17 and 18 of the Geneva Convention, which provide that prisoners need only give their name, date of birth and serial number. Article 18 states: “No physical or mental torture, nor any other form of coercion, may be inflicted on prisoners of war to secure from them information of any kind whatever. Prisoners of war who refuse to answer may not be threatened, insulted, or exposed to unpleasant or disadvantageous treatment of any kind.”

In another indication that US-led forces are flouting the rules of war, the US Central Command spokesman in Qatar, Brigadier-General Vincent Brooks, told a briefing that Iraqi prisoners of war were providing “helpful” intelligence.



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