

Occupation imposes Washington-style “democracy”

18,000 Iraqis illegally held in jails and prison camps

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On April 8, Condoleezza Rice shamelessly declared that the Bush administration and its allies were “helping the people of Iraq and Afghanistan to build free societies...to spread the blessings of liberty and democracy as alternatives to instability and terror.”

Recent statements by human rights groups and news reports provide further evidence that Washington’s version of “liberty and democracy” in Iraq is a Nazi-style reign of terror aimed at suppressing all opposition to its illegal neocolonial occupation. In fact, the eruption of a nationwide insurgency against US and coalition forces over the past three weeks came after a year of escalating violence and military provocations, with midnight-to-dawn raids, torture, assassinations, mass detentions and other breaches of the Geneva Conventions an everyday occurrence.

According to the Baghdad-based Organisation for Human Rights, at least 18,000 Iraqis are now being illegally held in jails and prison camps. In a country of only 25 million, these figures are staggering and represent the incarceration of 1 in every 1,380 Iraqi citizens. Moreover, during December, American troops were arresting 100 Iraqis per day—a rate that will have increased dramatically during the past month as operations intensified against the local population.

Referred to as “security detainees” by the US military, the prisoners are held without charge and denied access to lawyers, family and friends for months on end. Most of those incarcerated have been arrested during raids by coalition troops who storm houses, smashing down doors and windows and trashing household furnishings, televisions and other property. In many cases, armoured vehicles and Humvees or troops using high-powered ammunition or explosives seriously damage the homes.

After “securing” the raided property, troops generally handcuff and hood all men and boys before transporting them to the nearest military base for preliminary interrogations. The detainees are then taken to the nearest US-controlled prison. These include Abu Ghraib, infamous

for torture and executions under Saddam Hussein; Camp Cropper at Baghdad International Airport; al-Shaab Stadium; Camp Bucca, near Un Qasr in southern Iraq; and other jails in Habbaniyah, Nasariya, Tikrit and Baquba.

The US-based Christian Peacemaker Teams (CPT), a human rights organisation, has confirmed these Nazi-style techniques.

CPT released a report last month based on the testimony of 72 detainees and their families. It revealed that most of the detentions involved acts of violence, such as: “[H]ouse raids using excessive force against unarmed civilians; theft and destruction of personal property; lack of legal representation or clear judicial process for detainees; mistreatment, including torture of detainees during interrogation and in prison camps; withholding of information about detainees’ whereabouts and well-being from the detainees’ families and/or Iraqi and international human rights organisations.”

Like those held by the US in Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, the jails have been described as legal and physical black holes where prisoners are not formally charged with any offence and can be held indefinitely. Some of those arrested had previously been jailed for opposing Hussein’s Baathist regime; others kidnapped by US forces have simply disappeared.

Sixty-five-year-old Amal Salim Madi told Agence France-Presse that US soldiers arrested her three sons in October. “The Americans said they were taking my sons off for an hour of questioning. We have not seen them since.”

In a typical incident, US soldiers raided a home in Al Ewadiyah, a Baghdad suburb, last December. The inhabitants—the mother and brother and sister of the home owner—were forced to stand in the street in their bed clothes for five-and-a-half hours while 20 soldiers ransacked the house looking for weapons and resistance members. Nothing was found, but the brother was arrested.

The next day, soldiers returned, admitted that they had been given incorrect information but demanded to know the

whereabouts of the owner's brother-in-law. Unable to find him, they seized the owner's sister. Iraq's Coalition Provisional Authority and US military commanders claim to have no information on the whereabouts of those detained.

Last month, Mahmoud Khodair told the media that American soldiers kidnapped him after smashing into his basement apartment. He was accused of supporting Iraqi resistance fighters and held without charge for six months before being released. He has never been given any explanation why he was arrested or released.

Khodair, a 55-year-old cafe owner and released detainee, was forced to sit on his knees in the sun for 10 hours before his first interrogation. He claims that 14 million Iraqi dinars (about \$10,000) was stolen from his home during his arrest. "Nothing has changed since Saddam," he said. "Before, the Mukhabarat [Hussein's secret police] would take us away, and at least they wouldn't blow down the door. Now, some informant fingers you and gets \$100 even if you're innocent."

Although the US refuses to provide detailed information on the conditions inside its network of prisons, interviews with those fortunate enough to have been released reveal a nightmarish world where intimidation, death threats and torture are routine.

According to a March 21 *Newsday* article, Sadik Hamid al-Marsumim, a 26-year-old Baghdad construction worker, was beaten and forced to stay on his hands and knees for two hours while his guard used his back as a chess table. Al-Marsumim was then ordered to transfer sewage with a tablespoon from a full barrel to an empty one.

"The Americans said they were going to build a new Iraq, full of freedom and dignity," he said. "Where is the respect for human rights in what they did?" Al-Marsumim was incarcerated for five-and-a-half months without charge before being released.

Newsday also reported the case of Abdul Kahar Mehdi, a 30-year-old assistant engineering teacher. US soldiers shot the family dog during a December raid on his village and then killed his 70-year-old father.

"After bursting through the door, Mehdi said, soldiers handcuffed him, a brother and his father, Mehdi Jamal al-Duraj, a retired government land surveyor. They thrust plastic bags over their heads and tightened them around their necks," the newspaper reported.

"Within seconds, Mehdi said, he heard his father gasping for air. 'My father was screaming, 'I can't breathe! Help me!' and I was begging them to loosen the bag,' said Mehdi, who said he addressed the soldiers in English. 'But the soldiers responded, "Shut the up," and hit me in the chest with the butt of their weapon.'

"After several minutes, Mehdi said, he could no longer

hear his father breathe or move. 'I heard a soldier call on a radio and say, "The old man may be dead.'" US military officials apologised for his father's death and in February gave Mehdi a letter stating they were investigating," the newspaper said.

Last month, the US Army admitted that six soldiers have been charged with dereliction of duty, cruelty and maltreatment, and assault and indecent acts with another—the military's term for sexual abuse—at Abu Ghraib prison. They are among 17 soldiers from the 800th Military Police Brigade, including a battalion commander and a company commander, suspended from duties over incidents that occurred in November and December.

A week before Washington announced that the six MPs were being investigated, the US Army recommended that a marine reservist accused of killing an Iraqi prisoner not face charges or any military hearing. A second officer involved in the death is alleged to have punched, karate-kicked and dragged by the throat a prisoner in his custody.

Though the Army has refused to provide any details about the six MPs currently under investigation, it is believed that the incidents occurred some time during or after prisoners began rioting at Abu Ghraib on November 24. Three Iraqi prisoners were killed and eight seriously injured during the riots.

The soldiers face an Article 32 hearing that will decide whether the military will prosecute. It is unlikely, however, that the case will see any serious action taken against the soldiers. American troops cannot be tried in civil courts for killing civilians in Iraq. Local courts are forbidden from hearing cases against US soldiers or other foreign forces after the US-controlled governing body in Baghdad issued a directive last June.

Several human rights groups have compared conditions in US-controlled Iraqi prisons with Guantanamo Bay. In fact, Major General Geoffrey Miller, the former head of Guantanamo Bay, has recently been appointed deputy commander for detainee operations in Iraq.



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