

The execution of the 12 Nepalese workers in Iraq

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The killing of 12 Nepalese hostages by the Army of Ansar al-Sunna organisation has underscored once again the utterly reactionary character of terrorism. The murders reflect a deep-seated class contempt for the lives of ordinary working people who, in this case, come from one of the most impoverished countries in the world.

The 12 young Nepalese were seized around August 20 as they were travelling through western Iraq from Jordan to work as cooks, cleaners and labourers for a Jordanian-based contractor, Morning Star. Just over a week later, a gruesome video posted on the Army of Ansar al-Sunna website showed the beheading of one of the hostages and the shooting of the others as they lay face down on the ground. The bodies have not been recovered.

The killings were carried out with complete disregard for the appeals of family members and the sentiments of ordinary Nepalis, many of whom are driven by poverty to seek work in the Middle East. The captors did not bother to issue any demands. The Nepalese government had previously turned down a request from Washington to send troops to Iraq and had already banned labour contractors in Nepal from recruiting workers for positions in Iraq.

A statement from the Army of Ansar al-Sunna group declared that the executions were carried out “to set an example” to anyone who cooperated “with the occupying crusader forces in Iraq”. “Do not sympathise with this impure group,” it continued, “they have left their country and travelled thousands of kilometres to work with the crusader American forces and to support it in its war against Islam and holy warriors.”

Far from undermining the US occupation of Iraq, however, these cold-blooded murders will only strengthen the hand of US imperialism by sowing

confusion, animosity and division among working people around the world. Ordinary workers, millions of whom have opposed the US invasion of Iraq, will be repulsed by the senseless and cruel killing of impoverished Nepalese youth, whose only “crime” was to seek a means to support themselves and their families.

In Nepal itself, the executions have triggered angry protests in the capital of Kathmandu. Demonstrators set fire to the city’s Jame mosque, broke into the offices of Saudi Arabian Airways and Qatar Airways and ransacked the premises of more than two dozen labour recruiting agencies. The protestors also lashed out at the government for not doing more to free the hostages. Police imposed an indefinite curfew on the city after clashes with thousands of demonstrators.

The families of the victims remain in a state of shock. Jit Bahadur Khadka told the media that he had to borrow almost \$3,000 to pay a labour agent to find work for his son, 19-year-old Ramesh, in the Middle East. His son had told him that he was going to Jordan, and he had heard nothing prior to Ramesh’s capture and killing. “What sins have I done to deserve this?” he exclaimed.

Ramesh came from the village of Lele, 20 kilometres south of the capital. A neighbour Rupesh Ti Malsina told Australian radio: “We sent him because our village is poor, the economic condition is pretty bad. There aren’t many employment opportunities here, so he went to Kathmandu to work and then he went overseas... his family is very upset, they are shattered... All of us in the village are outraged—we won’t spare the agency that got him the job. The government just sat around doing nothing.”

More than 42 percent of Nepal’s population lives below the official poverty line. Per capita income is just

\$US250 a year and 36 percent of people consume less than the minimum daily calorie requirement. Without access to the basics of life, it is little wonder that many Nepalis seek a way out by taking jobs overseas.

An estimated 800,000 Nepalese work abroad as drivers, guards, cleaners and cooks—some 200,000 of these in the Middle East. They are exploited all the way along the line by labour recruiting companies and employers alike who frequently treat them as little more than slave labour. Despite a formal government ban, about 17,000 Nepalese, not counting ex-Gurkha soldiers, are thought to be working in Iraq—some lured by much higher pay than in other countries; others tricked by unscrupulous recruiting agents who initially offer them a job in neighbouring Kuwait or Jordan.

While the Nepalese government has described the executions as “completely shocking”, it is unlikely to do anything to disturb the highly profitable traffic in cheap labour. Remittances from overseas workers, amounting to about \$US1 billion each year, are one of the country’s main sources of foreign exchange. By comparison, the budget brought down in July this year was just \$1.32 billion. The government has announced compensation of \$US14,400 for each of the victims and declared today to be a day of mourning.

The Army of Ansar al-Sunna, which carried out the killings, is one of several Islamic extremist groups in Iraq that have ideological, and possibly organisational links, to Al Qaeda. The organisation appears to be a breakaway from Ansar al-Islam, a Kurdish Islamic fundamentalist militia based in northern Iraq. Like its parent organisation, the Army of Ansar al-Sunna has previously targeted pro-US Kurdish parties in the north. It claimed responsibility for the simultaneous suicide bombings of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) and Kurdish Democratic Party (KPD) headquarters in Irbil in February that killed 109 people.

The organisation captured, threatened to kill and then released the Lebanese-born US marine Corporal Wassef Ali Hassoun in July. Whatever its exact connections with Al Qaeda, the Army of Ansar al-Sunna’s methods bear the same trademark as related groups, such as the Jama’at al-Tawhid and Jihad organisation, which beheaded South Korean translator Kim Sun-il in June. Contempt and indifference for the sentiments of masses of ordinary people combines with an element of provocation that plays directly into the

hands of US imperialism.

The execution of the Nepalis takes place amid a deep crisis for the Bush administration created by continuing mass resistance in Iraq against the US occupation and profound opposition in the US and internationally to the war. Far from strengthening this international movement, the actions of the Army of Ansar al-Sunna directly cut across it, allowing the White House to deflect attention from its own crimes. And direct provocation is not out of the question. By their very nature, such groups are subject to infiltration and manipulation by intelligence agencies.

The murders come in the immediate aftermath of the siege of Najaf, which dealt a further serious blow to the US occupation and its puppet government headed by Prime Minister Ayad Allawi. While the timing may be coincidental, the atrocity is the latest in an emerging pattern of incidents that coincide with sharp crisis points for the Bush administration. Prior to the beheading of Kim Sun-il, the Jama’at al-Tawhid and Jihad group, said to be led by Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, murdered Nick Berg in mid-May, right at the point where Washington was rocked by torture revelations at the Abu Ghraib prison.

Whatever the precise reasons the latest murders confirm that none of the Islamic terror organisations represents the interests of the working class and oppressed masses. Like Al Qaeda itself, they reflect the strivings of dissident factions of the Arab and Muslim bourgeoisie, which are organically hostile to the development of a mass revolutionary movement against US imperialism. In the final analysis, their methods, no matter how extreme, are aimed at pressuring imperialism for concessions, not at overthrowing its oppressive rule.



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