Report documents torture by US-backed Iraqi police

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A new report published by Human Rights Watch, "The New Iraq? Torture and Ill-treatment of Detainees in Iraqi Custody," documents the systematic torture of prisoners in the hands of Iraqi police. As the headline of the report suggests, it questions whether the new force set up and trained by American advisers (including, among others, former New York City police chief Bernard Kerik) represents a significant change from the methods which prevailed under the dictatorship of Saddam Hussein.

The report is based on interviews with 90 current and former prisoners between July and October 2004. Of these, 72 individuals, or 80 percent of those interviewed, claimed that they had been tortured or abused at the hands of Iraqi police. This is an astonishing rate, and suggests a level of abuse that would rival the worst dictatorships.

Out of the 90 people interviewed, the organization said that 21 had been arrested for their alleged affiliation with a political party opposed to the Iraqi regime of Iyad Allawi. Many of these were suspected members of Muqtada al-Sadr's Mahdi Army. The interviews were carried out during and immediately following an uprising led by al-Sadr against the American occupation and its puppet government. Those interviewed included individuals who had been arrested in both Baghdad and Najaf.

Many of those arrested for political purposes were seized by an agency, the Iraqi National Intelligence Service (INIS), which reports directly to Allawi. The Allawi government, wrote Human Rights Watch, "appears to be actively taking part, or is at least complicit, in these grave violations of fundamental human rights."

An additional 54 were "criminal suspects," arrested for supposedly participating in terrorism, abduction and similar acts that fall under the jurisdiction of the Central Criminal Court. The rest were arrested for allegedly engaging in other criminal acts such as theft or murder.

On the basis of these interviews, Human Rights Watch concluded that "the abuse of detainees by the Iraqi police and intelligence forces has become routine and commonplace." It found that arrests were generally made without warrants, and many prisoners reported being beaten at the time of their arrest. "The vast majority had been held without appearing before a judge for far longer [than 24 hours]—in some cases for almost four months."

Further, the report found, "Methods of ill-treatment included routine beatings to the body using a variety of implements such as cables, hosepipes and metal rods. Detainees reported kicking, slapping and punching; prolonged suspension from the wrists with the hands tied behind the back; electric shocks to sensitive parts of the body, including the earlobes and genitals; and being kept blindfolded and/or handcuffed continuously for several days. In several cases, the detainees suffered what may be permanent physical disability."

Several of those who were interviewed by Human Rights Watch had visible injuries consistent with the type of treatment they reported.

Murtadha Mahdi, 24, had been picked up in Baghdad during the time of the Shiite uprising. He said, "They took us upstairs and put us in a small cell that had no air conditioning. There were other detainees there, altogether 15 or 17 people. We stayed there eight days. They blindfolded us during interrogation, and accused us of having blown up a shop that sells alcohol. They said we belonged to the Mahdi Army. I was beaten with cables. They threw water over my face and then attached electric wires to my ears."

Ali, 29, was picked up in Najaf: "When we entered headquarters, the [Iraqi] officer told us to kneel before him. We were hit on the back of our necks with a rifle butt. Then they took us upstairs to the first floor and told us to face the wall and began beating us severely. The Americans were there, standing some five or six meters away. They just stood and watched. I was beaten with a wooden stick on my forehead, and all of us were beaten all over the body with cables and hosepipes. That happened even before the interrogation began."

Others interviewed had similar stories to tell.

Ali's interview highlights the fact that the Iraqi police have been operating under the guidance of American troops and private "consultants." For its report, Human Rights Watch did not interview any of the thousands of prisoners who have been held by American forces, and those who were interviewed did not report US troops participating directly in the torture. It is clear, however, that the US government has encouraged the type of treatment that is being meted out.

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Human Rights Watch recounted the story of Captain Jarrell Southall, an American soldier in the Oregon Army National Guard, who reported coming across a group of Iraqi detainees who had been beaten by Iraqi police. The troops in Southall's unit attempted to halt the abuse, and radioed their commanders for orders on what to do. They were told to "Stand Down." [*See* "US commanders stop troops from protecting Iraqi torture victims"]

General Richard Meyers, chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff, was reported as saying in reference to the incident, "It is critically important to our success in Iraq that we reinforce, whenever possible, the authority and responsibility of the Iraqi government to handle its internal affairs."

The report quotes Steven Casteel, the Ministry of Interior's senior international adviser, who told the *Boston Globe* in 2004, "There's always a pendulum between freedom and security, and in the Middle Eastern culture they've always allowed that pendulum to swing more towards security. The Iraqi people are looking for this government to take a strong stance.... Obviously, we support human rights. And the Iraqi police understand they're not supposed to do anything outside the Iraqi legal framework, but that legal framework is not the US legal framework."

Exactly what legal framework Casteel was referring to is not clear; however it appears to include the legal framework employed by the Hussein regime. The Bush administration has repeatedly stated that the invasion of Iraq was necessary because Hussein "killed and tortured his own people." Many of those who are now serving in the Iraqi police, however, also served under Saddam Hussein.

According to the figures of Brigadier General Andrew McCay, head of the Civilian Police Assistance Training Team during the period of the interviews, of the some 60,000 Iraqi police, 27,000 to 28,000 were what he called "former regime police officers." In comments to Human Rights Watch, he pointed to the importance of these former officers under Saddam Hussein for the United States today: There is a "brutal insurgency" which "has to be beaten.... In this fight, the police are on the frontlines."

One Iraqi police officer, who had apparently also worked under Hussein, told Human Rights Watch that torture was necessary in order to extract information from the prisoners. "We were using these interrogation methods long before the Americans came," he said, "and we will continue to use them long after the Americans are gone."

From the report, it is also clear that the torture is closely intertwined with massive corruption. The American forces have recruited the most criminal layers of the Iraqi population, comprised of individuals who see a job in the police force as a way to extort money out of those who they capture. The police officials regularly threatened prisoners with indefinite detention unless they were paid off.

A businessman, aged 40, was arrested in Najaf. He told Human Rights Watch that after being tortured and held for eight days, "they began negotiating with me over the price for my release. Of course here everything is with money. If you want to get word to your family, you have to pay. If you want to eat, you have to pay. I was told that the captain was asking for one million dinars for my release. I said that was a lot of money.... We finally settled for 350,000 dinars."

Those who have been tortured include children. One woman told the group that her 14-year-old brother-in-law was arrested in the Baghdad district of al-Bataween in June 2004. "When he was brought to court, the judicial investigator told him that according to his file, he had confessed to possessing drugs at the time of his arrest. But he replied that he made no confession, that he had been made to sign a statement while blindfolded, and that he was beaten on his back and with *falaqa* [beatings on the soles of the feet]."

Many of those interviewed reported being forced to sign confessions that they had not been allowed to read.

The report was based on interviews because no human rights organizations have been allowed to visit detention centers run by Iraqi police.

Commenting on the response that the report has received, Sarah Leah Whitson, executive director of Human Rights Watch's Middle East and North Africa Division, noted that there has been no official response from either the Bush administration or the Iraqi government. Human Rights Watch met with representatives of the Iraqi government several months ago to report the conclusions of the interviews, however Whitson noted that "apparently it did not have much effect."

"One would expect that out of all of this, the Iraqi people would end up with a government that is significantly different from its predecessor," Whitson said. "However, the new government is engaged in the same types of activities as the old."

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