

US imprisons Iraqi journalists without charges

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At least nine Iraqi journalists who worked for major Western news organizations have disappeared into the network of concentration camps in which the US military is holding an estimated 17,000 citizens of the occupied country, the French news agency AFP reported May 5.

An even larger number of Iraqi reporters and other Arab journalists who do not have connections to the international media have also been thrown into prison.

The ruthless and often lethal suppression of the press has been a persistent feature of the war that Bush administration hails as a crusade for democracy and freedom in Iraq.

US repression—both detentions and shootings—combined with the ever-present threat of being kidnapped or killed by elements of the Iraqi resistance or criminal gangs has had the effect of reducing independent reporting to a minimum. More than 65 journalists and media workers have been killed in Iraq since the war began a little over two years ago. As far as the Pentagon is concerned, this is an altogether welcome development that severely limits exposure of the scale of the crimes carried out by US imperialism against the Iraqi people.

Most US journalists do not leave their hotels and, in some cases, even their rooms in heavily fortified compounds in and around the Green Zone, the US military's Baghdad enclave.

Their reporting, based in large part on handouts from the US occupation officials or material gained while "embedded" with US military units, is supplemented by on-the-spot accounts and interviews obtained by Iraqi "stringers," who risk their lives for a fraction of the salary paid to their Western counterparts. In the course of their work, many have been killed, imprisoned or subjected to violent attacks and threats.

The Iraqi stringers serve as a kind of journalistic cannon fodder in the media's coverage of the US war in their country. Like temporary workers everywhere, they are largely regarded as expendable.

Colonel Steve Boylan, a spokesman for the US military occupation forces, acknowledged that some of the detained journalists have been "held for several months." None of them have been formally charged with any crime or even presented in court, nor apparently are they going to be. "We have not been briefed that there are any changes at this stage," Boylan said, indicating that the military's interrogation of the journalists is continuing.

Among the latest arrests is that of AFP's photographer Fares Nawaf al-Issaywi, who was seized by Iraqi police while taking pictures in the shattered city of Fallujah and then turned over to American forces. The US occupation authority has taken extreme measures to prevent any independent reporting of the massive damage to the Iraqi city for fear of the impact on public opinion both in the Arab world and in the US itself.

According to Reuters, Issaywi was to have received a "photo of the year" award at an international press ceremony in China on May 28. "US forces have so far been unable to confirm they are holding him," the news agency reported.

Among the other imprisoned reporters is another Reuters employee, Ammar Daham Naef Khalaf, who was dragged from his home in Ramadi by US soldiers on April 11. He has apparently since been transferred to Abu Ghraib prison, where occupation forces hold people for up to 60 days incommunicado.

The news agency also highlighted the case of Abdul Ameer Hussein, a cameraman working for the American network, CBS News. He was shot and

wounded by American troops while covering the aftermath of a bombing in Mosul last month. Arrested by US troops as he left the hospital, he was charged with being a “danger to coalition forces” and thrown into Abu Ghraib as well.

A statement issued by US military authorities claimed that the cameraman “tested positive for explosive residue,” and that “Multinational forces continue to investigate potential collaboration between the stringer and terrorists, and allegations the stringer had knowledge of future terrorist attacks.” It added that he would be “processed as any other security detainee.”

Also arrested in Mosul by the US-organized Iraqi security forces on April 25 were a Reuters television cameraman, Nabil Hussein, his driver and another journalist. Hussein’s father was also arrested when he went to inquire about his son’s fate. Though the other journalist and the driver were released the same day, Hussein and his father were held for 11 days without charges.

On the same day as these arrests, an Iraqi television cameraman working for the Associated Press, Saleh Ibrahim, was shot to death at the scene of an explosion. His brother-in-law, a photographer for AP, suffered shrapnel wounds to the head in the incident. He was briefly detained by US troops. Witnesses said that a US patrol was in the immediate area when the shooting broke out. AP called for “US military officials to help determine how he [Ibrahim] was killed.”

Among others arrested recently is Wael Issam, a cameraman for the Dubai-based satellite news channel Al-Arabiya, who was detained at Baghdad International Airport on March 28 as he was leaving the country for Dubai. While no charges were filed against the cameraman, officials indicated he was arrested for having videotapes showing armed Iraqis.

Meanwhile, in March, the Pentagon announced that it would not accede to Reuters’s demands for reopening an investigation into the detention, torture and sexual abuse of three of its employees in Fallujah in January 2004.

The three—journalist Ahmad Mohammad Hussein al-Badrani, cameraman Salem Ureibi and driver Sattar Jabar al-Badani—were grabbed by US troops while covering the aftermath of a helicopter’s downing by resistance fighters. A cameraman working for NBC, Ali Mohammed Hussein al-Badrani, was arrested with

them.

The four were taken to a US base near Fallujah where they were beaten, deprived of sleep and subjected to acts of sexual humiliation, while soldiers taunted and took pictures of them.

The Pentagon claimed there was insufficient evidence to substantiate the charges but never interviewed any of the four Iraqis. While US officials promised to take a second look at the allegations after the Abu Ghraib revelations, the case has been swept under the rug along with the atrocities at Abu Ghraib itself.

Though the Reuters and AFP news agencies have publicly protested the arrests and abuse of their Iraqi employees, the reaction of the US-based television networks has been considerably more circumspect.

To forcefully press for an accounting would be to challenge the pervasive atmosphere of impunity that characterizes the US occupation in Iraq. The US mass media has helped create this atmosphere, all but ignoring the carnage suffered by Iraqi civilians at the hands of occupation troops.

The political enforcement of this code of silence was clearly exhibited last January, when CNN’s chief news executive Eason Jordan let slip at an international conference that US forces had deliberately “targeted” some of the scores of journalists killed in Iraq. The remark triggered a right-wing furor, and Jordan was forced to resign.



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