

More evidence of US dirty war in Iraq

Torture centre discovered in Baghdad

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The exposure of a secret Iraqi government torture centre in the very heart of Baghdad is damning confirmation that the US-led occupation is being accompanied by a dirty war of extrajudicial killings and torture.

On Sunday, a squad of American troops from the Third Infantry Division and local police entered an Iraqi interior ministry building and searched its basement. Inside the complex, which was operated by a US-trained police commando unit, they discovered cells holding 173 men and teenagers. Many of the men were seriously malnourished or exhibited signs of having been tortured. The majority were Sunni Muslim Arabs who had been detained during various counter-insurgency operations aimed at crushing the Iraqi resistance to the occupation.

According to various reports, the Third Division had received information that an Iraqi teenager, who had been missing since September, was being held in the complex. A US soldier who took part in the search told the British BBC: "It's not what we were expecting at all, we were looking for a 15-year-old boy."

Most of the details about the state of the prisoners have come from Iraqi sources. A local police officer told the British *Independent*: "These men were in a very bad way. They have obviously been tortured, some have been there a very long time and they were very frightened."

Hussein Kamal, the deputy interior minister, told journalists after visiting the scene: "I've never seen such a situation like this during the last two years in Baghdad. This is the worst. I saw signs of physical abuse by brutal beating, one or two detainees were paralysed and some had their skin peeled off various parts of their bodies."

Mohammed Duham, the spokesman for a prisoners' rights group in Iraq, told Reuters: "This is even worse than what was happening before (under Saddam Hussein). A lot of torture implements were found in the bunker, like saws to cut people's limbs and also razors to peel the skin off people's bodies."

The discovery of the torture centre follows persistent accusations, backed by eyewitness testimony, that the US-created Iraqi state is conducting a campaign of mass terror against opponents of the occupation.

The police commandos operating the Baghdad prison were formed, equipped and trained by US specialists in 2004 for the

express purpose of crushing the anti-occupation resistance. They work alongside American forces and have been recruited from two main groups.

Initially, American advisors signed up former members of Saddam Hussein's Republican Guard. Since the formation of the current Iraqi government, hundreds of members of the Iranian-trained Badr Organisation militia have also been enlisted. The Badr Organisation is the armed wing of the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI), the Shiite fundamentalist movement that has collaborated with the US occupation since the 2003 invasion and is a key part of the Iraqi government. Interior Minister Bayan Jabr is a SCIRI leader.

Each month in Baghdad, hundreds of corpses are being found, shot through the head or horribly tortured to death. In numerous instances, witnesses have alleged the murdered people had been detained just days or hours before by interior ministry police. The victims have ranged from clerics and politicians opposed to the occupation, to academics and professionals, to former state or military leaders in Hussein's regime, to Sunni Arab men from areas of the country where the resistance has strong support (see "More accusations of US-backed death squads in Iraq").

Given the extent of the accusations and witness testimony, there is every reason to suspect that many of the bodies found in rubbish dumps, rivers and abandoned buildings spent their final hours in similar facilities to the one that was discovered on Sunday. An anonymous police officer cited in the *Washington Times* stated that another secret interior ministry torture centre is operating out of the former stables of the police academy, near the Oil Ministry headquarters in Baghdad.

Any claim that the White House, the CIA and military intelligence agencies were unaware of the prison in the middle of Baghdad, or what was happening there, is simply not credible. The Iraqi government is nothing more than a US puppet. Dozens of US agents work inside the interior ministry and special forces advisors are embedded with the police commandos. The US military command dictates and coordinates counterinsurgency operations, while detainees and information are exchanged between US-operated and interior ministry-operated prisons.

Moreover, the dirty war being conducted against the Iraqi resistance—death squads, disappearances and torture—is modeled on similar US-directed and financed operations in El Salvador and other Latin American countries, and the bloody Operation Phoenix unleashed in Vietnam. The US government has political and legal responsibility for all the atrocities carried out by regimes that it has installed, financed and propped up.

Sunni Arab politicians responded to the discovery of the prison with demands for an independent, international inquiry. Omar Hujail of the Sunni-based Iraqi Islamic Party told Reuters: “We have been telling them for ages that there are people wearing the uniforms of the interior ministry raiding houses at night and arresting people, but everyone kept denying it. We urge the United Nations and human rights organisations to denounce these violations and we call on them to conduct a fair international inquiry.”

Washington rejected this call immediately. The spokesman for the US military command in Baghdad, Major General Rick Lynch, declared full confidence in an internal investigation announced by the Iraqi government. He declared: “We’re finding that the minister of interior is very sensitive to human rights violations and these allegations of abuse, and he’s taking appropriate action.”

The overall US commander in Iraq, General George W. Casey, issued a gagging order on all officers, including generals, instructing them to refer all inquiries about the American operation to him. Brigadier General Karl Horst, who commanded the troops who conducted the search, would only tell the media that the prisoners were “in need of medical care” and refused to give any details on what his soldiers discovered in the building. A Pentagon spokesman said only that they had “found things that concerned them”.

The UN, which has covered for every crime of the Bush administration in Iraq, from the invasion itself to the slaughter in Fallujah, predictably fell into line and also voiced its support for the US-installed regime investigating its own abuses.

It is possible that the troops who searched the torture centre accidentally stumbled upon it. It would not be the first time. On June 29, 2004, National Guardsmen from Oregon stormed a detention centre in Baghdad after a soldier witnessed prisoners being beaten in the courtyard. They discovered dozens of abused men in the custody of the interior ministry. To their shock, the Guardsmen were ordered by their senior commanders to withdraw from the prison and leave the victims in the hands of their torturers.

The more likely reason for the raid, however, is an attempt by the US occupation to undermine the position of SCIRI and other Shiite fundamentalist parties before the elections scheduled for December 15. SCIRI’s Badr Organisation has been accused in the US and Iraq of operating the prison without the knowledge of US forces.

In response, the head of the Badr Organisation, Hadi al-Amery, bluntly told Reuters on Wednesday: “This bunker is

run by the interior ministry. The Americans are there every day. If there was torture, we ask for an explanation.” He suggested the raid was an attempt to improve the badly tarnished image of the US military in the eyes of world public opinion. Amery declared: “The Americans are accused of violating human rights at Guantánamo Bay, Abu Ghraib... they want to cover up their crimes.”

A campaign to scapegoat SCIRI appears to be underway. The US embassy in Iraq issued a statement on Thursday, declaring that “we have made clear to the Iraqi government that there must not be militia or sectarian control or direction of Iraqi security forces, facilities or ministries”. The statement followed talks on Wednesday between Iraqi Prime Minister Ibrahim al-Jaafari and John Negroponte, the US Director of National Intelligence and the man who presided over the formation of the interior ministry police commandos while he was American ambassador to Iraq last year.

The embassy announced that Jaafari had agreed with Negroponte that US intelligence and troops would investigate as many as 1,000 Iraqi interior ministry and police facilities. Revelations of torture and abuse may be used to further discredit SCIRI and enhance the political fortunes of those Iraqi factions the Bush administration views as more amenable to its long-term plans to dominate Iraq’s resources and territory.

Representatives of the Bush administration have made little secret of the fact they would prefer that the government in Baghdad was headed by longtime CIA assets such as Iyad Allawi or even Ahmed Chalabi, who was involved in high-level talks at the White House during the past week. The *Washington Post* commented yesterday: “Today he [Chalabi] is a strong contender for prime minister in next month’s elections, and highly placed sources say he has become the choice of many US officials to lead the country.” The article noted: “One of his biggest supporters, Vice President Cheney, is still there, and met with him this week.”

What will not change due to the “investigations” or any changes to the Iraqi government is the use of mass terror and repression by the American military to suppress the Iraqi resistance. Even as US officials pontificated about their opposition to torture and human rights violations, reports have been filtering out of numerous civilian casualties in the towns and villages in western Iraq currently being attacked by thousands of US marines in an operation codenamed “Steel Curtain”.



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