

US holding thousands without trial

Torture in Iraq worse since Abu Ghraib

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7 March 2006

The US and its allies in Iraq are holding more than 14,000 civilian prisoners—in some cases for years—without charges or trials, while torture and abuse in detention camps are now worse than when the horrors of Abu Ghraib were exposed nearly two years ago.

These are the damning conclusions of a report entitled “Beyond Abu Ghraib: Detention and Torture in Iraq,” released Monday by the London-based human rights group Amnesty International.

The arbitrary detention of tens of thousands of Iraqis in the three years since the US invaded the country and the physical abuse of those held are ongoing war crimes by the US occupation. These practices, carried out in flagrant violation of international law, go a long way towards explaining the inexhaustible supply of recruits willing to die fighting to expel American troops from their country.

Describing the human rights situation in Iraq as “dire” and the record of US and British troops in the country as “unpalatable,” the report charges that the “continuing detentions without charge or trial of thousands of people in Iraq who are classified by the MNF [Multinational Force] as ‘security internees’” had facilitated and encouraged the kind of torture seen in the images that emerged from Abu Ghraib in April 2004 and again in February of this year.

The US-led occupation, Amnesty continued, “has established procedures which deprive detainees of human rights guaranteed in international human rights law and standards.”

The report points out that detainees have no means of challenging their detention or even learning the charges against them. In many cases, their arrests are not even reported, amounting to forced “disappearances,” a practice barred by international law and associated with fascist military dictatorships.

“Some of the detainees have been held for over two years without any effective remedy or recourse; others have been released without explanation or apology or reparation after months in detention, victims of a system that is arbitrary and a recipe for abuse,” the document states.

The human rights group arrived at the figure of 14,000 detainees by using numbers supplied by the US occupation forces. Undoubtedly, the real figure is considerably higher.

According to this official count, there are 4,710 Iraqis still held at Abu Ghraib prison, another 138 at Camp Cropper, near the Baghdad airport, 7,365 at Camp Bucca, in the south near Basra, and 1,176 at Fort Suse, near Suleimaniya. In addition, 650 are listed as being detained in US and British military facilities elsewhere in Iraq.

The report states that at least 750 Iraqis have been held for nearly three years since the onset of the US invasion, without ever having been charged with any crime, much less brought to trial. Nearly 4,000 have been held for more than a year under these conditions.

While some of these prisoners include senior Iraqi government

officials captured by American troops—the so-called “high-value” detainees—the vast majority are innocent Iraqis caught up in the continuous security sweeps, without any evidence against them.

The report notes that two of these “high-value” detainees have died as a result of torture and physical abuse. Abd Hamad Mawoush, an Iraqi army general, was suffocated to death in November 2003 by an American army interrogator, who had forced a sleeping bag over his head and then sat on his chest. A court martial of the interrogator resulted only in a forfeiture of salary.

The second such fatality was that of Muhammad Mun'im al-Izmerly, 65, a chemical scientist, who was detained soon after the invasion and taken to Camp Cropper, where he died in January 2004. According to a US autopsy report, he “died from a sudden hit to his head.”

The continued US detention of such individuals is a violation of international law and gives the lie to Washington's so-called handover of power to the Iraqi government. The US authorities had claimed that they were holding them as enemy prisoners of war, a status that no longer has even a pretense of legality following the formal transfer of power in June 2004.

Torture has become even more widespread since the formal transfer of power, Amnesty charges, as a result of US-backed Iraqi security forces taking charge of some detention facilities. Among other methods, “victims have been subjected to electric shocks or have been beaten with plastic cables.”

Among the case studies cited by Amnesty is that of a 47-year-old imam referred to as Karim R, who was “detained and tortured by US forces in 2003 and then by Iraqi forces in 2005.” In both cases, he was subsequently released without ever having been charged.

After being picked up in Baghdad by American occupation troops in October 2003, “He was insulted, blindfolded, beaten and subjected to electric shocks from a stun gun (taser) by US troops at a detention facility in the Kadhimiya district of Baghdad,” the report states. He was held for seven days.

In May 2005, Karim R was detained for 16 days by Iraqi Interior Ministry forces at one of their detention facilities in Baghdad. He described his torture to Amnesty International:

“They tied my hands to the back with a cable. There was an instrument with a chain which was attached to the ceiling. When they switched it on the chain pulled me up to the ceiling. Because the hands are tied to the back this is even more painful (...) Afterwards they threw water over me and they used electric shocks. They connected the current to my legs and also to other parts of my body. (...) The first time they subjected me to electric shocks I fainted for 40 seconds or one minute. It felt like falling from a building. I had a headache and was not able to walk. The interrogator said: You better confess to

terrorist activities, in order to save your life. I responded that I was not involved in these activities and that I had a heart condition. (...) Later they forced me to confess on camera. They asked questions claiming that I was a terrorist but they did not even give me the chance to reply. They just stated that I was a terrorist. (...).”

Accounts of similar electric shock torture are common among those detained by the US-backed Iraqi security forces, the report states. Other frequently reported tortures include beatings with plastic cables, burnings with lighted cigarettes and ripping out victims’ nails. The report says that some victims have reported the presence of US military personnel during their torture and interrogation.

In a growing number of cases, however, the victims of torture are not left alive to testify about their experiences. They are victims of extra-judicial executions, killed by Iraqi death squads linked to the Interior Ministry after they have been tortured, their bodies dumped by the roadside.

Once such case cited in the report is that of Hassan al-Nu’aimi, a Sunni cleric who was a member of the Association of Muslim Scholars. His body was found a day after he was picked up by an Iraqi police commando unit. The report quotes from a description of the body’s condition that was provided by a correspondent for the British *Observer* newspaper:

“There are police-issue handcuffs still attached to one wrist, from which he was hanged long enough to cause his hands and wrists to swell. There are burn marks on his chest, as if someone has placed something very hot near his right nipple and moved it around. A little lower are a series of horizontal welts, wrapping around his body and breaking the skin as they turn around his chest, as if he had been beaten with something flexible, perhaps a cable. There are other injuries: a broken nose and smaller wounds that look like cigarette burns. An arm appears to have been broken and one of the higher vertebrae is pushed inwards. There is a cluster of small, neat circular wounds on both sides of his left knee. At some stage [he] seems to have been efficiently knee-capped. It was not done with a gun—the exit wounds are identical in size to the entry wounds, which would not happen with a bullet. Instead it appears to have been done with something like a drill. What actually killed him however were the bullets fired into his chest at close range, probably by someone standing over him as he lay on the ground. The last two hit him in the head.”

Also cited is the case of 12 men who suffocated to death last July after being thrown into a police van and left there for 14 hours in the searing summer heat. Amnesty cites sources who report that the 12 “were a group of bricklayers who had been detained on suspicion that they were insurgents and then brutally tortured by police commandoes before being confined in the police vehicle.” Medical staff who examined the bodies confirmed that there were signs of torture, including electric shocks.

The report charges that the US and British occupation authorities are fully complicit in these atrocious crimes. “Close day-to-day collaboration between MNF forces and those of the Iraqi government suggests that MNF commanders and the governments to which they are responsible have been well aware for a considerable time that the Iraqi forces they support are responsible for gross abuses of human rights,” it states. “Yet, as part of their cooperation with Iraqi government forces, the MNF continued to hand over some of those whom its forces detained into the custody of Iraqi forces.”

As further confirmation of this complicity, the report cites a December 2005 radio interview with a former commander of special

forces at the Interior Ministry, General Muntazar Jasim al-Samarra’i. He acknowledged that torture was routine, but went on to affirm: “Members of the US forces visited this prison every day. The US troops knew everything about the torture.”

Nor has torture stopped in the US-run facilities, despite claims by the Pentagon that new procedures were put in place in the wake of the worldwide outrage triggered by the images of physical abuse and sexual humiliation that came out of Abu Ghraib. The report cites a number of exposures of US troops using electric shocks to torture prisoners in recent months.

That such practices continue is hardly surprising. Amnesty notes that only a handful of lower-ranking military personnel were prosecuted for the crimes at Abu Ghraib. This was despite the clear evidence that a policy of torture had been implemented on the orders of the highest echelons of the Pentagon, including Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, and those of the White House itself.

In a number of cases, those prosecuted “received sentences that fail to reflect the gravity of these violations,” including fines or brief confinement to quarters for personnel found to have killed detainees through torture and abuse, the report points out.

The report states that the torture and abuse of prisoners at Abu Ghraib constituted “war crimes,” adding that governments must allow “no impunity for anyone found responsible for war crimes, regardless of position or rank.”

While this is a noble sentiment, the assertion of a right to torture with impunity starts at the top of the US government. President Bush and his lawyers have repeatedly argued that he is empowered to carry out any action—including unlawful detentions, torture and even murder—as “commander in chief” in the so-called war on terror.

This assertion of impunity has been largely accepted by the Democratic Party, which has shown no interest in making a political issue of the unending revelations concerning torture in Iraq, Guantanamo Bay, Afghanistan and elsewhere. Likewise, the mass media has relegated such revelations to a footnote. Just as it dropped any references to the appalling new photographs and videotapes of torture at Abu Ghraib after barely a day last month, the revealing report from Amnesty International was largely ignored by major US newspapers and broadcast news outlets.



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