

UN warns of growing humanitarian crisis in occupied Iraq

Iraqi government withholds civilian death count

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A new United Nations report on human rights in Iraq paints a devastating portrait of the conditions of life facing the civilian population as the US occupation enters its fifth year. The report from the UN Assistance Mission for Iraq (UNAMI) covers the period from January 1 to March 31, 2007, which includes the beginning of the Bush administration's Baghdad "surge," Operation Law and Order.

The report depicts a society in which prisoners are tortured and denied due process, academics and doctors are kidnapped and assassinated, women are the target of increased "honor killings" and civilian men, women and children are dying in huge numbers as a result of suicide bomb attacks and at the hands of the US military and Iraq security forces.

The report is also notable for what is does not include: the number of Iraqi civilian deaths. The Iraqi government has refused to release these figures, which are collected routinely by the Iraq Ministry of Health's Operations Center and the Medico-Legal Institute in Baghdad. The US military does not count civilian casualties.

In its report issued in January, the UN said that 34,452 civilians had died violently in 2006, a figure the Iraqi government denounced as highly exaggerated, claiming that only 12,357 had died. This time around they simply refused to provide the data, at the same time criticizing the latest report as "inaccurate" and "unbalanced."

The UN accused the Iraqi government of withholding the figures because the data would underscore the worsening humanitarian crisis. "We were told that the government was becoming increasingly concerned about the figures being used to portray the situation as very grim," UNAMI human rights officer Ivana Vuco told a news conference Wednesday.

Both the UN and Iraqi government figures are far lower than those emerging from a study conducted by researchers from Johns Hopkins University published by the *Lancet* last October. This study estimated that 655,000 excess Iraqi deaths had occurred since the US invasion in March 2003 and subsequent occupation, with close to a third of these directly attributable to violence on the part of US forces and their allies.

Numbers obtained from various Iraqi ministries by the *Los*

Angeles Times indicate that already this year 5,509 civilians have died violently in Baghdad province alone, which includes the capital city. These included 1,991 in January, followed by a slight drop to 1,646 in February. However, the effects of the implementation of the Baghdad "surge" operation in mid-February resulted in a rise to 1,872 civilian deaths in March.

According to the UN report, civilian casualties between January and March were concentrated in and around Baghdad, and were also high in the governorates of Nineveh, Salahuddin, Diyala and Babel. The report cites the increased levels of US and Iraqi troops involved in the "surge" as a major factor in the civilian deaths. The counterinsurgency operation has intensified raids in Baghdad neighborhoods and increased security checkpoints across the city, resulting in increased casualties.

Sectarian violence has claimed scores of lives on a daily basis. On February 3, a truck packed with a ton of explosives detonated in a busy market in Sadrivah, a predominantly Shia district, killing an estimated 135 and injuring 339 others. On April 18, in the most deadly attack since the 2003 invasion, the same Baghdad marketplace was the scene of a bomb attack, claiming 140 lives. That same day, 233 civilians were killed in bomb attacks across Iraq.

Academic professionals and students continue to be the targets of assassinations and kidnappings, creating an atmosphere of terror on campuses and further destroying Iraq's higher education system. Officials of the Ministry of Higher Education told UNAMI that an estimated 200 academics were killed in the first four years of the war. Two attacks on al-Mustansiriya University in January and February of this year claimed an estimated 111 lives. On January 16, two car bombs killed at least 70 people, mostly students, and injured another 140. On February 25, a suicide bomb attack killed 41 students at the university.

Journalists and other media workers have come under sustained attack, an indication of the deterioration of press freedom under US occupation. The Iraqi Society for the Defence of Journalists' Rights reports that 170 journalists and media workers were killed between March 2003 and January 15, 2007.

The following casualties, as cited in the UNAMI report, give an indication of the increased vulnerability of media professionals in occupied Iraq. They are only a portion of the media-related fatalities included in the UN's three-month report:

"Hussein al-Zubaidi, a journalist with the weekly *al-Ahali* newspaper, was killed by gunmen in Baghdad on 19 February, while the bullet-riddled body of Abdul-Razzaq Hashim al-Khakani, a journalist with Jumhuriyat al- Iraq radio, was found at the Medico-Legal Institute on 20 February. He had been kidnapped a week earlier in the predominantly Sunni district of al-Jihad in Baghdad. Two employees of *as-Safir* daily newspaper in Baghdad were targeted in February. On 11 February, the newspaper's chief editor Hussein Jasim al-Jibouri was injured in an assassination attempt, and died on 16 March.

"The body of journalist Jamal al-Zubaidi was found on 3 March in Baghdad's al-'Amel district. He was reportedly last seen leaving his office on 23 February. A day later, Mohan Hussein al-Dhahr, editor of the daily *al-Mashreq*, was killed outside his home in the al-Jami'a district. His would-be abductors shot him dead as he tried to escape. He reportedly received six bullets to the head. *Al-Mashreq*, for which he worked for four years, is a privately-owned, widely read Baghdad newspaper whose management was said to have received numerous death threats to cease publication."

The plight of women continues to worsen. In the three-month period studied, UNAMI received information on some 40 cases of "honor killings" of women in the governorates of Erbit, Duhok, Sulaimaniya and Salahuddin. These young women were killed by family members for alleged "immoral" conduct, while their deaths were attributed to "accidental burns" or other causes. According to the news source *Awena*, in Duhok there were 289 burning cases resulting in 46 deaths recorded in 2005, and 366 burning cases resulting in 66 deaths in 2006.

A severe erosion of basic democratic and human rights has accompanied the US war and occupation. In the wake of the US invasion—which promised to bring freedom and democracy to Iraq—a series of regulations have been implemented stripping away basic rights to due process for Iraqi citizens, and shielding US forces from prosecution under Iraqi law for violent assaults on the population, including torture, rape and murder.

New emergency regulations put into force February 13, as the Baghdad "surge" began, contain no explicit measures guaranteeing minimum due process rights. They authorize arrests without warrants and interrogation of suspects with no time limit placed on how long they can be held in pre-trial detention. Under the new measures, suspects accused of offences including murder, rape, theft, destruction of private property and other crimes are to be punished in accordance with another set of anti-terror laws implemented in 2005, which provide for the death penalty for these and other crimes.

Legal proceedings can only be described as a travesty of

justice. Many confessions are extracted under torture by Iraqi soldiers. According to the UNAMI report, "The use of torture and other inhumane treatment in detention centers under the authority of the Ministry of Interior and the Ministry of Defense continues to be of utmost concern." The already large number of Iraqi detainees is expected to increase substantially as a result of the Baghdad operation. According to the Iraqi Ministry of Human Rights, at the end of March the total number of detainees, security internees and sentenced prisoners in the country stood at 37,641.

Suspects detained by the Multinational Force (MNF) can be denied access to legal counsel during the first 60 days of internment. After that, defendants are most often represented by court-appointed attorneys with little knowledge of the substance of the charges or evidence against their clients. In the vast majority of cases, defendants are represented by different counsel at the investigative and trial stages, severely restricting their ability to mount a competent defense.

Trial proceedings generally last only 15 to 30 minutes, followed by deliberations of only several minutes per case, including in death penalty cases and serious felonies resulting in life imprisonment. Because many defendants are unaware of their rights under the law, they often miss the 30-day limit to appeal their cases. And in death penalty cases, which are automatically submitted for appeal, defendants are denied the right to submit new information for consideration on appeal.

Death sentences and executions serve as one of the grimmest indictments of the state of democracy in Iraq. Taking their cue from US policy, capital punishment was reinstated in the Iraq in mid-2004. According to Amnesty International, since then Iraq has sentenced more than 270 people to death and executed at least 100. "Higher totals were recorded only in China, Iran and Pakistan," Amnesty said.

Other indices cited in the report of the human catastrophe plaguing occupied Iraq include the following:

* An estimated 54 percent of the Iraqi population struggles to survive on less than US\$1 a day; 15 percent live in extreme poverty (less than 50 US cents a day).

* Acute malnutrition doubled from 2003 to 2005, rising from 4.4 percent to 9 percent.

* The official unemployment rate stands around 60 percent.

* Only 32 percent of Iraqis have access to clean drinking water.

* Health facilities lack critical drugs and equipment; 12,000 of 34,000 doctors have left since the US invasion; 250 have been kidnapped and 2,000 have been killed.



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