

Thousands held in horrific conditions in Iraqi prisons

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The *Los Angeles Times* on July 21 revealed some of the abuses taking place inside US-monitored, Iraqi government prisons. The article documented the plight of prisoners in a Baghdad facility, which has the Orwellian name of Forward Operating Base Justice.

The prison in the suburb of Kadhimiyah was intended to house just 300 detainees, but is currently holding close to 900. Journalists touring the facility saw as many as 500 men being held in a single hall. No attempt was being made to separate prisoners according to their alleged crime or age. Some were as young as 15. To sleep, prisoners were provided with only foam mattresses or cardboard boxes. The urinals and toilets were blocked. Prisoners were forced to defecate in a solitary shower and basin, and attempt to wash themselves under a broken water pipe.

According to US military policeman Colonel Daniel Britt, these conditions were “appalling,” but conformed to “international standards”. American personnel, who visit the prison nearly every day to advise the Iraqi jailors, turn a blind eye to systematic human right violations. An Iraqi police official told the *Los Angeles Times* that most of the prisoners were held for at least two months before being brought before a judge and formally charged. Under Iraqi law, they must appear before a judge with 72 hours.

Just one medical officer is assigned to the prison and the police official admitted there was little in the way of medication to treat injured or sick detainees. The *Los Angeles Times* wrote: “Partially treated wounds, skin diseases and grossly unsanitary conditions appear common here.”

Most of the prison guards are Shiites and are connected with the Shiite parties that gained political power by collaborating with the US occupation against the mainly Sunni Arab resistance movement. One of

the prison commanders is allegedly a member of the Mahdi Army militia, which follows the populist Shiite cleric Moqtada al-Sadr. Shiite prisoners, many of whom would be Mahdi Army loyalists, “will just get released, just let go,” according to a US military official.

Sunni prisoners face a different scenario. One told journalists that guards had contacted his families following his arrest and demanded a bribe of \$20,000 to secure his release—a huge sum in a country where the US invasion has forced over eight million Iraqis to live on less than \$1 per day.

Most of the detainees are Sunnis. The numbers in the prison have swollen since February due to the US “surge”. Thousands of additional American troops have deployed into Baghdad to carry out major operations in suburbs where the occupation has never been able to establish control. Hundreds of Iraqi men have been dragged off to detention centres for no other reason than the fact they lived in one of the targeted areas.

US officials told ABC News last week that the number of detainees being held in US facilities has increased from 16,000 in February to more than 22,500. In March, the UN human rights report on Iraq stated that at least 20,000 more were being detained in prisons operated by various branches of the Iraqi security forces. That figure has likely grown to 30,000.

Little is known about the treatment of these prisoners. This month, however, the US-based Human Rights Watch published the findings of an investigation into conditions at 10 prisons operated by the *Asayish* or interior police of the US-backed Kurdish Regional Government, which presides over Iraq’s three northern provinces. Over 150 detainees were interviewed between April and October 2006.

The report summary states: “Human Rights Watch

found that in the vast majority of *Asayish* detainee cases the Kurdistan authorities did not charge detainees with offenses, allow them access to a lawyer, bring them before an investigative judge, provide a mechanism by which they could appeal their detentions, or bring them to trial within a reasonable time period....

“Detainees reported a wide range of abuse, including beatings using implements such as cables, hosepipes, wooden sticks, and metal rods. Detainees also described how *Asayish* agents put them in stress positions for prolonged periods, and kept them blindfolded and handcuffed continuously for several days at a stretch. The vast majority of detainees with whom Human Rights Watch spoke also reported that they were held in solitary confinement for extended periods. With some exceptions, Human Rights Watch found that conditions of detention at *Asayish* facilities were severely overcrowded and unhygienic....” Close to 10 percent of the detainees had been transferred into this nightmare by the US military. (See “Caught in the Whirlwind: Torture and Denial of Due Process by the Kurdistan Security Forces”)

Several recent reports suggest that the conditions in prisons run by the Iraqi government are worse. The militias of Shiite fundamentalist parties have thoroughly infiltrated the Iraqi security forces and are utilising their positions to conduct a brutal civil war against Sunni opponents of the occupation and US-backed regime.

An unconfirmed report published on the website iraqslogger.com on July 19 claimed that a secret underground detention facility had been found operating in the very centre of Kadhimiyah—right under the noses of US forces. Some 415 men were being imprisoned there, many of whom were Sunnis who had held military or political positions in Saddam Hussein’s Baathist regime. The sources claimed that they were being fed food scraps. They also alleged that Shiite militiamen had executed several hundred prisoners over the preceding two years and dumped their bodies in the streets of Baghdad. On a typical day, more than 20 bodies, generally showing signs of hideous torture, are found in Iraq’s capital.

The report implied that the operator of the secret prison was the Badr Organisation. Badr is linked with the Supreme Islamic Iraqi Council (SIIC), a Shiite party

that has close links with the Iranian regime and which has played a major role in all the US-backed Iraqi governments since the March 2003 invasion. Badr members dominate the Iraqi Interior Ministry. There have been continuous allegations since 2004 that the ministry operates death squads and employs torture.

The latest accusation was made on July 22 by the Sunni Islamic Party of Iraq (IPI), which claimed that a prison had been raided by US troops near the Al Shaab international football stadium, on the other side of the Tigris River from Kadhimiyah. The IPI press release stated: “A US force stormed on Saturday [July 21] a Ministry of Interior prison near al-Shaab International Stadium in Baghdad, arrested six officers and found torture instruments in a secret room.”

The US military has not confirmed the IPI’s allegations, suggesting that if US troops did raid a prison it was not on the orders of their senior commanders. In August 2004, Oregon National Guardsmen who took matters into their own hands and stormed an Iraqi government facility after witnessing prisoner abuse were ordered by the US military hierarchy to leave the victims in the custody of their Interior Ministry torturers.

The true extent of the crimes that have been carried out in Iraqi prisons will not be fully known until all foreign troops have been withdrawn from Iraq and credible, independent investigations can take place. It may well be established, however, that the abuses revealed at Abu Ghraib during 2003 were only an early attempt to use abuse, torture and murder to break the resistance of the Iraqi people to the US occupation. The US military has since subcontracted the dirty work out to its Iraqi collaborators.



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