

Over 500 juveniles held by US in Iraq and Afghanistan

Joe Kay
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United States occupying forces are holding about 500 juvenile prisoners in Iraq, and an additional 10 in Afghanistan, according to a document submitted by the US to the United Nations.

The document, sent to the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, was released publicly last week.

A juvenile is defined as an individual under the age of 18. Since 2002, the US says it has detained for some duration of time 2,500 juveniles, most of them in the massive prison complexes constructed by the US military in Iraq.

The heavy arrest of juveniles in Iraq underscores the fact that US operations are directed at the population as a whole and often involve widespread and indiscriminate arrests.

The US also admits to having detained eight juveniles at Guantánamo Bay, though it claims that it no longer holds anyone there under 18. At least two individuals who were under 18 at the time of their arrest are still held at Guantánamo Bay, and face military commissions. Other agencies have estimated significantly higher numbers of juveniles held at Guantánamo.

The number of juvenile prisoners increased sharply last year, corresponding to the so-called “surge” in Iraq. According to the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), the number of juveniles held in Iraq increased from 200 in September 2005, to 250 in May 2007, and to 800 in September 2007. Arrests of children in Iraq rose to an average of 100 per month in 2007, up from 25 per month in 2006.

A report in Agence France-Press in December 2007 reported a figure of 950 children held at one prison complex at Camp Cropper, near Baghdad. The figures have appeared to have dropped somewhat since then, at least officially.

The US military of course claims that all those behind bars had engaged in “anti-coalition activities.” There is no way to verify these claims or to determine how long the young prisoners are kept in jail. The US report to the UN declared that the *average* length of imprisonment for juveniles was under 12 months.

To the extent that those under 18 are actually involved in resistance activities—as opposed to simply being picked up for being in the wrong place at the wrong time—it is a reflection of the deep hostility to the US occupation that pervades Iraqi society. Since the 2003 invasion of their country, conditions for Iraqi youth have declined dramatically, with the destruction of the education and social infrastructure combined with mass unemployment.

The ACLU released a report last week documenting US military treatment of juveniles. The report stated that the military’s lack of protections and consideration for the juvenile status of detainees constitutes a violation of the Optional Protocol on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict, ratified by the US in 2002. It also violates internationally accepted norms. (See “Soldiers of Misfortune: Abusive US Military Recruitment and Failure to Protect Child Soldiers”).

In addition to reporting on juveniles held abroad, the US document to the UN also reviewed US policies toward recruitment of juveniles into its own military. In a statement, the ACLU commented that the US fails to uphold its obligations to “protect youth from recruiter misconduct such as false promises or coercion. According to the government report, there were 2,456 claims of such recruiter misconduct in 2006 alone. According to the Government Accountability Office, the actual number of instances is likely higher, due to poor tracking and reporting.”

The ACLU disputed the government figures on

juveniles held for some period of time at Guantánamo Bay, reporting that the number is closer to 23. Other estimates have put the figure as high as 60.

Two prisoners who were captured as juveniles remain in Guantánamo Bay. These are Mohammed Jawad, who was captured when he was about 16, and Omar Khadr, who was captured when he was 15. They have both been held for over five years in inhuman conditions and subjected to torture. They are both being tried before drumhead military commissions, and could face life sentences.

Khadr, a Canadian citizen, was shot by US Special Forces in Afghanistan in July 2002. Earlier this month, a US military judge rejected a defense motion arguing that Khadr's prosecution should cease because he was a child when arrested, and therefore should be entitled to protection and assistance. (See "Guantánamo judge rules Omar Khadr, arrested at 15, can be tried as war criminal")

Jawad, who is now 23, was captured in December 2002 and accused of throwing a grenade that injured two American soldiers. He has testified that he was tortured to elicit false confessions and has refused to participate in the military commission on the grounds that it is illegal.



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