Iraq: Education Under Siege

Kidnapping of scores of academics in Baghdad

By Dahr Jamail and Ali Al-Fadhily
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BAGHDAD, Nov 18 (IPS) – The recent kidnapping of scores of academics in Baghdad highlights the desperate situation of the educational system in occupied Iraq.

Armed men wearing Iraqi police uniforms abducted as many as 150 academics from the Ministry of Higher Education on Tuesday.

Alaa Makki, the head of the Parliament's education committee called the action a "national catastrophe" and the minister of higher education, Abed Dhiab al-Ujaili, announced that teaching in all of Baghdad's universities would be halted "until we find out what happened," and because "we are not ready to lose more professors."

While 70 of the academics have been released since then, others remain missing.

Academics, along with other professionals, have been increasingly targeted by sectarian violence which continues unchecked across much of Iraq. Thousands of professors and university researchers have long since fled the war-torn country.

An administration manager of a large university in Baghdad spoke with IPS on condition of anonymity: "Iraqi universities have turned into militia and death squad headquarters... Pictures of clerics and sectarian flags all over are not the only problem, but there is the interference of clerics and their followers in everything."

The university employee, who said he fears for his life each day he goes to work, explained that religious clerics now had the authority to "sack teachers and students, forbid certain texts, impose certain uniforms and even arrest and kill those who belong to other sects or those who object to their behaviour."

He angrily added, "Our government seems to approve all that, as no security office ever intervened to protect teachers and students or make any change to the situation."

Iraqi security forces have been accused of taking part in, or at least ignoring several mass kidnappings, which are widely believed to have been carried out by sectarian groups. The Sunni minority have blamed many of the kidnappings on armed groups from what are now the dominant Shi'ite political parties, who also control the Ministry of Interior.

The higher education ministry is currently headed by a member of the main Sunni Arab political bloc.

The 2003 U.S.-led invasion and occupation of Iraq, with the broken promises of reconstruction and rehabilitation of Iraq's educational system, have not been the only cause of the current disaster.

UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation) had reported before the 1991 Gulf War that Iraq had one of the best educational performances in the region. Literacy rates were extremely high and primary school enrollment was 100 percent.

The number of schools in Iraq under the Saddam Hussein regime (1979-2003) increased due to the compulsory learning law enacted in the 1970s. A huge campaign for the eradication of illiteracy was organised and people had to send their children to school to avoid legal repercussions.

The Ba'ath party had influence on the kind of subjects studied concerning religion. In addition, education administrators and teachers preferred to join the ruling party, mostly for job security, but they still had to be scientifically qualified as teachers.

Being members of the Ba'ath party when the U.S.-led occupation began, particularly when CPA (Coalition Provisional Authority) Administrator Paul Bremer instituted the "de-Ba'athification" plan, caused most teachers and administrators to be fired, arrested or later to be assassinated by death squads and replaced by others who were selected by new ruling parties, which tended to be Shi'ite religious fundamentalists.

These factors, on top of the harsh economic sanctions and the current occupation, have left Iraq's education system in shambles.

"The newly employed teachers are either selected for being members of Islamic parties in power or those who paid bribes in order to get the job," a chief education supervisor in Baghdad told IPS, speaking on condition of anonymity.

He has managed to keep his job since he had never joined the Ba'ath Party, and added that other problems had arisen because, "Some of them [teachers] are too old to teach and others brought fraudulent graduation certificates that we could not deny because they were sent to us by parties who have militias."

Billions of dollars were supposedly spent for rehabilitating schools that were severely bombed by U.S. war planes during the 2003 invasion. However, the quality of work by foreign contractors, such as Bechtel Corporation, and their subcontractors was so poor that thousands of schools across the country remain in a state of disrepair.

Most of the money was spent on repainting and supplying the schools with cheap equipment that has not stood for long.

"The money for rebuilding schools just vanished between the U.S.-appointed Iraqi Governing Council and the western contractors and so we still need a lot to be done," Abdel Aziz, an education manager told IPS, "We are doing our best to facilitate the educational operation, but we are facing a great deal of problems with the capacity of our schools and teachers."

Another problem in some areas is the misuse of school buildings. People in conflict-ridden areas like Ramadi and parts of Baghdad have complained that U.S. soldiers use school buildings as combat posts, especially for snipers.

Other schools are used by militias and death squads in areas of Baghdad and southern provinces of Iraq.

Today, security is perhaps the major problem facing the education system. Teachers and students find it too dangerous to move between their homes and schools under such a chaotic security situation. Further complicating matters, there is great fear of abduction for ransom and an even greater of for assassination by death squads.

And the poor state of Iraq's economy has exacerbated the situation.

"There is no possible way for me to cover school expenses," Omar Jassim told IPS. Father of four from Baghdad, Jassim said, "I am unemployed and life became too expensive, as well as the high school bus fare and clothes for the children. I had to cut them from school and make them help me provide food for the family."

Many families have decided not to send their children to school and have instead pushed them to work as cleaning boys or beggars in the streets.

Last month Iraq's Ministry of Education released statistics which indicated that only 30 percent of Iraq's 3.5 million students were attending classes. This is less than half the number from the previous year, which, according to the Britain-based non-governmental organisation Save the Children, was 75 percent attendance.

Attendance rates for the new school year which started on Sep. 20 were at a record low, according to the ministry.

According to the Ministry of Education, 2006 has been the worst year for school attendance since U.S.-led invasion in March 2003. The immediate pre-war level of attendance in 2003 was nearly 100 percent.

At least 270 academics have been killed during the occupation, according to the Iraq study group Brussels Tribunal.

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Ali Al-Fadhily