

Outrage over Imminent Execution of Iraqi Women

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BAGHDAD, Mar 2 (IPS) – Three young women accused of joining the Iraqi insurgency movement and engaging in “terrorism” have been sentenced to death, provoking protest from rights organisations fearing that this could be the start of more executions of women in post-Saddam Hussein’s Iraq.

The execution of the three — Wassan Talib, Zaineb Fadhil and Liqa Omar Muhammad — and a fourth, Samar Sa’ad ‘Abdullah, found guilty of murdering five members of her family, are scheduled to begin Mar. 3, according a member of the citizens group Brussels Tribunal.

All four are being held in the Khadamiya female prison in northern Baghdad.

One of the three alleged “terrorists”, Muhammad, 25, gave birth to a daughter after her arrest and is still nursing the child in prison. A second, Talib, 31, is also in prison with her three-year-old child, according to Amnesty International.

Talib and Fadhil, 25, were sentenced to death by the Central Criminal Court of Iraq (CCCI) on 31 August 2006 for the 2005 murder of several members of Iraqi security forces in the Baghdad district of Hay al-Furat. Both women denied any involvement. Fadhil reportedly claimed that she was abroad at the time of the alleged killings, according to Amnesty International.

Muhammad was sentenced to death on 6 February 2006 by the CCCI, for kidnapping an official from the ‘Green Zone’ in 2005, according to sources in the Iraqi Lawyers’ Union. Her husband is said to have been detained and accused of the same crime.

It is not known whether the three alleged “terrorists” will lodge appeals. But while this is possible, it is unlikely they will be successful without their own legal representation, according to sources.

An appeal by Abdullah was earlier rejected and she faces imminent execution, according to Amnesty International.

Many lawyers here are interpreting the death sentences on the three alleged “terrorists” as an attempt by the Iraqi regime to intimidate insurgents. Two of those sentenced to death — Fadhil and Mohammad — were accused of joining their husbands and two members of their families in their alleged crimes, according to the Iraqi Lawyers’ Union.

Some Iraqis here have openly expressed surprise and disbelief that these women could have been involved in any insurgency.

It was a question of honour for Iraqi men that their women did not participate in any form of violence, they told IPS.

Independent lawyers have expressed strong criticism of the trials, saying they were “unfair” and violated international conventions.

The accused were denied the right of legal defence, Walid Hayali, a lawyer, said. He was barred from representing the three in court, he added.

“No lawyer was given the opportunity to do his job,” a close friend of Talib confirmed to IPS.

But the right to independent legal representation was guaranteed under international law, lawyers here said.

The passing of a death sentence on the mother of a newly born child was also in violation of a specific UN safeguard, they added.

Iraqis questioned here said they believed the executions, if allowed to take place, would raise the level of violence across Iraq.

“This won’t go unpunished,” Fadhil Aziz, 40, from the Amiriya district in Baghdad told IPS.

“The U.S. and their Iraqi collaborators must pay for the crimes they are committing against our honour,” he warned.

The impending executions are likely to increase the exodus of Iraqis out of the country.

“I am taking my family anywhere in the world rather than staying here and facing this,” Abi Muhannad, an Iraqi teacher from the Kadhamiya district in Baghdad told IPS.

The UN estimates that some two million Iraqis have already fled the country. Approximately 50,000 are leaving every month, threatening to overwhelm other Middle Eastern countries, particularly Syria, Jordan and Lebanon.

Approximately one million are today living in Syria and up to 750,000 in Jordan, according to the UN High Commission of Refugees.

Roughly 40 percent of Iraq’s middle class is believed to have fled the country since the U.S. invasion in 2003, according to the UN.

After the overthrow of Saddam Hussein’s regime, the American occupation authorities suspended the death penalty. But in August 2004, the new interim Iraqi government reinstated it for crimes including murder, kidnapping and threats to national security. In October 2005 a tough new anti-terrorism law was introduced, setting capital punishment for “proving, planning, financing and enabling” terrorism.

Last year Iraqi courts sentenced 235 people to death and over 6,000 to life imprisonment, according to the London daily al-Sharq al-Awsat.

There are over 2,000 women classified as “security detainees”, according to Mohamed Khorshid, quoted by the newspaper.

It is not known for certain how many have been executed since August 2004, but it is

believed the figure is between 50 and 100. During 2006 at least 65 men and women were executed by the Iraqi government, including former Iraqi president Saddam Hussein.

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