

Torture and civilian deaths reach record levels in Iraq

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Global Research, September 23, 2006

[World Socialist Web Site](#) 23 September 2006

Region: [Middle East & North Africa](#)

Theme: [Crimes against Humanity](#)

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The latest UN findings on Iraq provide a devastating picture of torture, escalating civilian deaths and lawlessness that represents a damning indictment of US-led occupation. Three years after the illegal invasion, the violent activities of the US military and its allies in suppressing any opposition have been supplemented by a spiralling sectarian civil war.

According to a United Nations Assistance Mission for Iraq (UNAMI) report released on Wednesday, the civilian death toll throughout the country reached a record of 6,599 for July and August, or more than 100 a day, up from 5,818 for previous two months. The UNAMI figures plot a rise from 710 in January to 1,129 in April and 3,149 in June followed by 3,590 in July and 3,009 in August.

The actual toll is likely to be far higher. UNAMI estimates are based on two sources: the Ministry of Health, which records deaths reported by hospitals, and the Medico-Legal Institute in Baghdad, which tallies the unidentified bodies it receives. During July, the health ministry reported no deaths in Anbar province—the region of fiercest resistance to the US military.

UNAMI stated it continued to receive reports of US-led forces participating “in incidents of excessive use of force and restrictions imposed on the movement of civilians”. Deaths are also being caused by anti-US resistance groups as well as criminal gangs. However, the huge toll is increasingly due to sectarian violence.

“These killings reflect the fact that indiscriminate killings of civilians have continued throughout the country, while hundreds of bodies appear bearing signs of severe torture and execution-style killing. Such murders are carried out by death squads or by armed groups, with sectarian or revenge connotations,” the report stated.

UNAMI also pointed to rising numbers of “honour killings” of women, with an increase of women and girls shot through the chest, rather than the head. According to local informants, extremist Sunnis and Shiites have created secretive sharia committees, responsible for the brutal enforcement of their regressive moral codes for women.

Most of the killings—5,106 for July and August—took place in Baghdad, which has been turned into a battleground between sectarian militia. Violent attacks and reprisals involving the often-arbitrary killing of civilians are a daily occurrence. A city of more than five million people, or about 20 percent of the total population, that once prided itself on its cosmopolitanism is being carved into ethnically cleansed suburbs.

The UNAMI report estimated that 300,000 people have been displaced from their homes since February when the bombing of the Al-Askariya mosque in the city of Samarra triggered a sharp rise in communal violence. UN secretary general Kofi Annan warned on Monday of a “grave danger that the Iraqi state will break down, possibly in the midst of a full-scale civil war”.

The responsibility for this sectarian carnage rests with the Bush administration, which has relied on Shiite fundamentalist and Kurdish nationalist parties to impose its rule in Iraq. Many of the gangs of killers that operate inside the police force, including the Interior Ministry’s notorious Wolf Brigade, were established by American operatives in 2004 and modelled on US-backed right-wing death squads in Latin America. A growing stream of US commentators have this year openly advocated the partition of Iraq on communal and sectarian lines as the means for bring the country and its oil firmly under US control.

It is no surprise that shadowy government forces and various militia groups operate networks of secret torture chambers throughout Baghdad. Washington’s handpicked prime minister Awad Allawi set the example in 2004 when, according to eyewitness accounts to the *Sydney Morning Herald*, he personally shot dead at least six handcuffed prisoners in Baghdad’s Al-Amariyah security centre in front of police and US military personnel. As one of the eyewitnesses declared: “Allawi wanted to send a message to his policemen and soldiers not to be scared if they kill anyone.”

Torture and brutal executions are now an everyday occurrence. The UNAMI report stated: “Bodies found at the Medico-Legal Institute often bear signs of severe torture, including acid-induced injuries and burns caused by chemical substances, missing skin, broken bones (back, hands and legs), missing eyes, missing teeth and wounds caused by power drills and nails.”

Speaking in Geneva on Thursday, Manfred Nowak, the UN’s special rapporteur on torture and cruelty, declared that torture was “totally out of hand” in Iraq. “The situation is so bad many people say it is worse than it had been in the times of Saddam Hussein,” he said. “You have terrorist groups, you have the military, you have police, you have these militias. There are so many people who are abducted, seriously tortured and finally killed.”

Nowak conducted extensive interviews with Iraqi refugees in neighbouring Jordan. He said he received allegations of torture in prisons run by Iraq’s interior and defence ministries as well as jails under the control of the US and its allies. “Many of these allegations, I have no doubt that they are credible,” he said. Nowak called for the full publication of the results of a government inquiry into human rights violations at Al-Jadiriya detention centre in November 2005.

Speaking to the London *Times*, a US State Department official vehemently rejected Nowak’s statements, saying: “How anyone could compare state-sanctioned torture under a dictator to the situation today is beyond us.” Torture, however, is exactly what the Bush administration has sanctioned not only in Baghdad, but Guantánamo Bay and a network of CIA-run prisons around the world. Nowak diplomatically declared that the situation appeared to have improved since the exposure of US abuse of prisoners in Abu Ghraib. But there is no independent confirmation of the current conditions inside US military prisons in Iraq.

The UNAMI report said 35,000 Iraqis were being held in detention at the end of August, a 28

percent increase from the end of June. Of those, 13,571 were being held by US and other foreign forces, which continue to conduct arbitrary, widespread searches and detentions. All the prisoners in US custody are being held indefinitely without charge, in flagrant violation of their basic democratic rights. As of September 9, only 1,445 had been put on trial in Iraqi courts, and 1,252 convicted.

Ex-detainee Mouayad Yasin Hassan told Associated Press last weekend that he was detained "for security reasons" in April 2004 and held for 13 months at Abu Ghraib and Bucca where he was interrogated incessantly. He was refused a lawyer or any contact with his family. Another former prisoner Waleed Abdul Karim, who was incensed about his treatment in a US military jail, declared: "I will hate Americans for the rest of my life."

In a report to the UN Security Council on September 1, secretary general Annan tentatively expressed "concern" that arbitrary detention and torture continued to be widespread. "On June 1 2006, a joint inspection of a prison site by representatives of the Iraqi Government and the Multinational Force found 1,431 detainees with signs of physical and psychological abuse. A total of 52 arrest warrants have been issued against officials of the Ministry of the Interior but they have yet to be served," he stated.

Torture and execution-style killings are continuing unabated. Over the past week, nearly 200 bodies have been found in the capital. US military spokesman Major General William Caldwell declared on Wednesday that there had been "a spike", saying: "Many bodies found had clear signs of being bound, tortured and executed. We believe death squads and other illegal armed groups are responsible for this type of violence." Given the origins of the death squads, however, the involvement of US forces certainly cannot be ruled out.

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