

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL PRESS RELEASE

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Iraq: Amnesty International urges Bush and Blair to intervene in relation to "disappeared"

(London/Basra) Irene Khan Secretary General of Amnesty International has today written to President George W Bush, and Prime Minister Tony Blair to seek their intervention in relation to the issue of Iraq's 'disappeared' people. Amnesty International is concerned that evidence related to past 'disappearances' may be being destroyed or interfered with and seeks assurances that US and UK forces in Iraq are doing all within their power to safeguard such evidence.

This appeal comes after Amnesty International researchers visited Basra's bombed Governorate building following reports indicating the location of a possible secret underground prison. Researchers visited a series of underground levels underneath the heavily damaged building, a roughly sealed off stairwell suggested a lower level. Amnesty International's team alerted UK forces about this suspicious finding, but the organization could not determine if, in fact, there exists a lower level or what its purpose might have been.

"A failure to treat this issue properly and as a matter of urgency would increase the possibility of the perpetrators of such abuses escaping justice, depriving families of the right to learn the full truth about the fate and whereabouts of their relatives, and preventing effective reparations for victims and their families," Amnesty International said today.

"'Disappearances' are among the gravest of human rights violations. They cause extreme agony for the victims and for the relatives. The governments of the US and UK are in a position to take urgent steps that may help alleviate some of the suffering of the relatives of the 'disappeared' in Iraq. The US and UK may also be in a position to find any of the 'disappeared' who may still be alive."

Amnesty International is calling on the US and UK governments, as the Occupying Powers under international humanitarian law, to do everything in their power to ensure that important evidence, such as mass graves and documentation, is protected and preserved. As an immediate step, identified or suggested grave sites must be guarded against interference.

Information received relating to Iraqi 'disappeared' or otherwise missing persons, should be channelled to the International Committee of the Red Cross, which is already recording such information and is in the process of setting up a system for properly addressing such issue. The work of reliable Iraqi organizations in this respect should be assisted and encouraged.

The evidence protected or recorded by US and UK forces, or in their possession, should

be made fully available to future impartial and independent investigations and prosecutions. It should also be made available to the UN Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances and to relatives of the 'disappeared'.

Amnesty International believes that these tasks would be greatly assisted if the US and UK governments were to publicly support Amnesty International's call for a UN Commission of Experts to look comprehensively at the issue of how best to ensure justice for 'disappearances' and other gross human rights violations in Iraq.

"A real commitment to the people of Iraq that such mechanism will be established as a matter of urgency, will provide a degree of reassurance that they will see the emergence of truth and justice, and that they will be protected from such grave human rights violations in the future," Amnesty International said.

Amnesty International is also aware of the many reports of relatives of the 'disappeared' and others, who believe that some of the 'disappeared' may still be alive and may be in underground or secret places of detention. Amnesty International is not in a position to verify the reliability of such information. However, in the light of these reports, US and UK forces should establish and publicise a mechanism to receive reports of such suspected places of detention. Where such reports appear reliable the US and UK forces should investigate them, as a matter of urgency, with a view to finding any such detainees. Such investigations should be carried out in such a way as to preserve evidence and information that may be used in future impartial and independent investigations and prosecutions.

Amnesty International is calling on the US and UK authorities to cooperate fully with the International Committee of the Red Cross by ensuring that it has free access to all detention facilities and to all categories of detainees, and that it can perform fully its mandate relating to missing persons.

For more information or to arrange an interview please contact + 44 7768 182 445 (Iraq crisis mobile) or the team in Basra on + 88 216 211 59713.

For further information on Amnesty International's concerns and recommendations about the crisis in Iraq please visit: <http://www.amnesty.org/go/iraq>. To see Amnesty International's report on 'disappearances' in Iraq, please visit: <http://web.amnesty.org/library/Index/ENGMDE140051997>.

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For more information please call Amnesty International's press office in London, UK, on +44 20 7413 5566

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