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Iraq: Armed groups show utter disdain for basic principles of humanity

Armed groups opposed to the US-led multinational force and Iraq's government are showing utter disdain for the lives of Iraqi civilians and others, continuing a pattern of war crimes and crimes against humanity, Amnesty International said in a new report published today.

At the end of one of the worst months that saw some of the highest number of killings by armed groups since the beginning of the war in Iraq in March 2003, Amnesty International denounced the armed groups' failure to abide by even the most basic standards of humanitarian law and said there can be no valid justification for deliberate killings of civilians, hostage-taking, and torture and killing of defenceless prisoners.

"Those who order or commit such atrocities place themselves totally beyond the pale of acceptable behaviour," said Amnesty International. "There is no honour nor heroism in blowing up people going to pray or murdering a terrified hostage. Those carrying out such acts are criminals, nothing less, whose actions undermine any claim they may have to be pursuing a legitimate cause. "

In its 56-page report, Iraq, *In Cold Blood: Abuses by Armed Groups*, Amnesty International recognises that many Iraqis oppose the continuing presence of US and allied forces in their country, and that these forces have themselves committed grave violations, including killings of civilians and torture of prisoners.

"But abuses committed by one side do not and can not justify abuses by another," said Amnesty International. "This is all the more the case when the principal victims are ordinary Iraqi men, women and children attempting peacefully to go about their everyday lives. All sides to the ongoing conflict have a fundamental obligation to respect the rights of civilians or of those who are rendered defenceless. Those who breach this obligation, on which ever side they stand, must be made to stop and they must be held to account."

In its report, Amnesty International cites an Iraqi government minister's claim, made last April, that 6,000 civilians had been killed and another 16,000 wounded in attacks by armed groups in the 24 months up to March 2005. Yet, the attacks are so frequent and the security situation so grave, it is impossible to calculate with any confidence the true toll upon the civilian population let alone the long term consequences that so many Iraqis will inevitably suffer. The report details the following abuses committed

by armed groups during the past two years in Iraq:

Direct attacks against civilians intended to cause the greatest possible civilian loss of life;
Indiscriminate attacks resulting in the deaths of civilians including children, and the elderly;
Targeting of the United Nations headquarters, the International Committee of the Red Cross and other humanitarian organizations;
Hostage-taking, abductions, torture and killings;
Attacks on women and girls, including indiscriminate or direct attacks on women activists;
Killing of captured police and military personnel, scores of whom have been seized, disarmed and then shot dead while defenceless.

"We urge armed groups to immediately cease all attacks against civilians and all other abuses" said Amnesty International. "Armed groups, like other parties to the conflict in Iraq, are required to comply strictly with international law in all their acts and remain accountable for their actions."

Amnesty International is also asking key religious leaders and other influential figures in Iraq and beyond to speak out against the indefensible, and make clear that there can be no circumstances at all that allow or justify war crimes and crimes against humanity.

"We earnestly hope that these leaders, by speaking out publicly or through other more discreet means, can help to make the difference," said Amnesty International. "If we and they fail, it will be Iraqi civilians who first and foremost will continue to pay the awful price."

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