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Iraq: Field Update

"We just want to know the truth and bring to justice those who caused us such suffering."

Several weeks have elapsed since the end of hostilities and people continue to dig in search of their loved ones. The horror of the past is beginning to surface in the form of **mass graves** which continue to be uncovered throughout the country. In the latest discovery in the town of al-Mahawil, near al-Hilla, Iraqis have dug up some 3,000 bodies from a site that is said to contain up to 15,000 "disappeared" people. All are believed to have been arrested and summarily executed in the aftermath of the 1991 uprising.

For many years Amnesty International has been gathering data on the "disappeared" in Iraq by interviewing or receiving information from relatives and others, often about people who had been arrested as far back as 1980. But for the first time ever Amnesty International has been able to interview and collect testimonies from victims or relatives of victims inside Iraq, something that was unthinkable under the previous government. Since 23 April Amnesty International delegates have conducted numerous interviews with victims of human rights violations by the previous government and visited sites of mass graves in the Basra area. This is a summary of some of the testimonies:

During a visit to al-Haritha neighbourhood of Basra the delegates interviewed two sisters, **Yosra and Hadhan** whose brother, Shaker, had been executed in 1980 for allegedly being a member of the banned Islamist group *al-Da'wa*. As a result six other brothers went into hiding, the youngest being 13. In 1990 a seventh brother, Ayad, was arrested. To date all seven brothers **remain missing**.

Yosra and Hadhan were arrested in July 1986, along with their father and 10 other people, after a man, who later was found to be an Intelligence officer, came to see the family and offered to smuggle the six missing brothers out of Iraq. After an 11-day period of detention in Basra, the sisters were transferred to the General Security in Baghdad and held there for six months. During their detention Yosra and Hadhan were beaten on the soles of the feet (*falaqa*), threatened with electric shocks, execution, verbally abused and did not receive any medical care. Yosra said: "During the interrogation period, it was very hard on us, each second felt like months, we will never forget it". Hadhan was hit on the shoulders which are still marked. Their interrogators, all males, were seeking information about one of the brothers, 'Emad. Another woman who was arrested with them, Safia, was made to undress during her interrogation. She was sentenced to death and executed nine months later.

Yosra and Hadhan were brought before a judge and charged with "protecting a member of an unauthorized organization", Safia. They were permitted a defence lawyer and after a two-hour trial they were sentenced to 20 and 15 years' imprisonment respectively. They were not allowed to appeal. After the trial the two sisters were transferred to Al-Rashad Women's Prison in al-Thawra district in Baghdad. They were held incommunicado for two years before they were allowed family visits. Yosra and

Hadhan were released in 1991 after a presidential amnesty. Both continue to suffer from poor eyesight due to their time in prison.

Amnesty International also met the **Taleb** family. Four of their children, **Hayder, Monaf, Haifa** (female) and **Hana'** (female). Hayder and Monaf were arrested in **1979** while they were praying in a mosque. Haifa was arrested on her way from school and Hana' was arrested at her school on 3 October **1980**, allegedly because of religious practices (praying and wearing the Islamic scarf, Hijab). **The fate and whereabouts of Hayder, Monaf, Haifa and Hana' are unknown to this date.** The rest of the family, including the father, mother, a one-year-old boy, Abbas, and two other brothers were also arrested on the same day. One of the brothers, Baqir, was tortured and Abbas was beaten in front of the father. While Abbas and his mother were released after 18 months, the rest of the family remained in detention for an additional seven years. The family do not expect to find their missing children alive but said "We just want to know the truth and bring to justice those who caused us such suffering."

In another case **Mahdi Ghadhban al-Ta'i** is still searching for his three sons, **As'ad, Adnan** and **Mortadha**, all secondary school students. They have been **missing since 1992**. Mortadha was taken from his evening workplace, Adnan was taken from school and As'ad was arrested at home. Mahdi told Amnesty International: "I used to be a wealthy man, I sold everything to try and find my sons. Take everything but just give me back my sons". He needed money to pay for information about his sons.

In the al-Andalous area of Basra the Amnesty International team was taken to a grave site where the remains of seven people, who allegedly **"disappeared" in 1991**, had just been found. Although the delegates did not see the corpses a foreign journalist confirmed the removal of the remains.

Amnesty International visited a site in Arabian Gulf Street in Basra where it is alleged that about 33 people were lined against a wall and executed. They were buried in the same site. Amnesty International spoke to Salah who also witnessed the executions. Families removed some of the bodies while the bodies of others were plagued by dogs.

Since the fall of Saddam Hussain Iraqis have been searching for **"secret prisons"** said to exist around the country and where thousands of "disappeared" prisoners are said to be held. Voices were said to have been heard from underground in various places. For example in al-Haritha Amnesty International delegates saw a list of underground prisons posted near a mosque.

At the site of the Iraqi Oil Tanker Company, located near Basra University, Amnesty International met an individual who said he witnessed the execution of between 20-25 men and 10 women in the yards of the factory in 1991. The bodies were buried nearby.

In Umm al-Broom Square, in the centre of Basra, Amnesty International delegates came across a copy of a document issued by the Revolutionary Court which contained 141 names of detainees. Another list contained the names of 84 people who were executed between 1982 and 1984.

Amnesty International visited a mass grave in al-Fadhliya, near Abu al-Khasib, in wasteland. Two people among the crowd who were digging were able to recognize their father's clothes and burst into tears in an atmosphere charged with anguish and grief. The mass grave seems to contain hundreds of bodies. The victims are believed to have been executed during the uprising of 1991. They were either executed on site or brought in trucks and thrown in the graves, according to local people.

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