

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL

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Amnesty International urges the Iraqi government to extend deadline for Camp New Iraq residents

Amnesty International is concerned that some 3,250 Iranian long term residents of Iraq who reside at Camp New Iraq, 60 kilometres north of Baghdad, are at serious risk of severe human rights violations if the Iraqi government goes ahead with its plans to force the closure of the camp by the end of December 2011.

The Camp, formerly known as Camp Ashraf, has previously been attacked several times by Iraqi security forces causing the deaths of dozens of residents and injuries to others. Most recently, Iraqi troops stormed into the camp on 8 April using grossly excessive force and live fire against residents who tried to resist them. Some 36 residents, including eight women, were killed and more than 300 others were wounded. At least nine camp residents were killed and others injured in an earlier attack by Iraqi security forces on 28-29 July 2009. Some 36 camp residents who were detained were held for more than two months and reportedly tortured before being released on 7 October 2009.

Camp Ashraf, as it then was, was formerly under the protection of the United States Force-Iraq (USF-I) until June 2009, when it was transferred to the control of the Iraqi government. Since then, the camp and its residents have been virtually besieged by Iraqi troops as the government intensifies pressure on the residents, many of whom belong to the People's Mojahedin Organization of Iran (PMOI), to leave Iraq. The PMOI is an Iranian opposition organization that formerly engaged in armed attacks on Iran before deciding several years ago to cease espousing violence. Supporters of the PMOI were allowed to reside as exiles in Iraq by the former Iraqi President Saddam Hussain, overthrown in 2003.

The Iraqi government has repeatedly stated its opposition to the continued existence of the camp. While on a visit to Iran last June, Iraq's President Jalal Talabani announced that Camp Ashraf would be closed by the end of this year and the Iraqi government subsequently confirmed this to the United Nations Secretary-General in early October.

Meanwhile, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees - UNHCR, (the UN Refugee Agency), has reported receiving a large number of individual asylum requests from camp residents and has called on the Iraqi government "to consider extending the deadline for the closure of the Camp" and to provide "necessary facilities" to allow asylum interviews to be held in a "safe, neutral and confidential location" rather than at the camp."¹

¹ UNHCR, Camp New Iraq (formerly Camp Ashraf) residents and the determination of their refugee status claim, 13 September 2011. <http://www.unhcr.org/cgi-bin/texis/vtx/home/opendocPDFViewer.html?docid=4e7064e26&query=camp%20ashraf>

By 31 October, however, negotiations were still continuing between UNHCR, the United Nations Assistance Mission for Iraq (UNAMI) and the Iraqi government to identify a location at which to conduct such asylum interviews. Camp residents, for their part, contend that these interviews should be held at or close to the camp because they fear that their security and safety otherwise might not be guaranteed and that they would be at risk of arrest by Iraqi security forces and forcible return to Iran, where many of them would be at serious risk of gross human rights violations.

Amnesty International is also urging the Iraqi government to allow adequate time for the asylum applications of Camp New Iraq residents to be properly scrutinised by UNHCR in order to make its determinations relating to the refugee status of camp residents confidentially, on neutral ground and in a timely and safe manner. Throughout this process the safety and security of the camp residents must be of paramount importance. If the interviews are held outside Camp New Iraq the residents' safety and security, including their travel back to the camp, must be guaranteed.

Amnesty International urges the Iraqi government to fully respect the human rights of the residents of Camp New Iraq and to end all harassment of the residents by its security forces surrounding the Camp.

Amnesty International also calls on the international community, in particular European and North American countries, to come forward and agree to resettle the residents of Camp New Iraq who have been accepted as refugees in a timely manner.

Background

Notwithstanding the fact that the camp residents have been living in Iraq for 25 years, the Iraqi government has made clear its wish that they leave the country. In 2009 the government told the residents that they should leave Iraq by 15 December 2009 or else face forcible relocation within Iraq, but did not enforce this due apparently to international pressure, including from USA and the UN.

Since the April 2011 assault, however, the Iraqi authorities have tightened controls on the camp residents to the extent that some of those injured and other residents suffering from chronic ailments were prevented or obstructed from leaving the camp to obtain more specialised medical treatment than that available there. As well, the security forces have also reportedly sought to impede the flow of phone and other communications between the camp residents and the outside world and have installed loudspeakers, prompting fears among residents that the Iraqi security forces are preparing to carry out a further violent incursion into the camp.

In the face of international pressure, following the April 2011 assault on the camp, the Iraqi government said it had set up a committee to investigate the attack and the killings; however, as in other cases where such investigations have been announced, no outcome has been reported and it remains unclear whether any serious investigation was ever conducted.