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Iraq: Beheading of civilian condemned, hostages must be released

Amnesty International condemns in the strongest terms the abduction and beheading of an American civilian by an armed group, Muntada al-Ansar, in Iraq - a video of which was released yesterday. The organization is appalled by the public display of the victim's execution by the group.

The killing of prisoners is one of the most serious crimes under international law. It is a war crime, and if part of a deliberate and systematic attack against a civilian population, it would also constitute a crime against humanity.

"Such acts are unjustifiable under any circumstances and constitute a serious crime under international law. Those responsible should be brought to justice in line with international standards," said Amnesty International.

"Armed groups must release immediately and without any precondition all hostages, and should refrain from deliberately attacking, abducting and killing civilians."

Political and community leaders in Iraq should exercise their influence to ensure an end to the taking and killing of hostages.

A video posted on a website yesterday supposedly showed 26-year-old Nick Berg, an American businessman, being beheaded by the group. The group said his death was revenge for the ill-treatment of Iraqi prisoners by American soldiers in Iraq.

Hundreds of civilians, Iraqis and foreigners, have been deliberately killed by armed groups or individuals in Iraq.

Amnesty International is further concerned that footage surrounding the execution was shown on web sites and on television.

Amnesty International believes that the cycle of violence in Iraq will only be broken if all parties fully respect international human rights standards.

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