

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL

Public Statement

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Iraq: Amnesty International appeals to armed groups for the safety and release of all hostages

Amnesty International is gravely concerned at the threats made by armed groups in Iraq to kill hostages. The organization condemns the use of hostages as bargaining chips in Iraq and urges armed groups to respect minimum standards of international humanitarian law, justice and humanity in their actions. The taking and killing of hostages is prohibited under principles of international law. Amnesty International calls on armed groups to comply with these principles in all circumstances.

In recent days several people, including a 7-year-old boy, were taken hostage and have been threatened with execution for different reasons. Margaret Hassan, the director of Care International's operations in Baghdad, was abducted from her car by armed groups on 19 October 2004. Her captors have so far released two videos of her on the Arabic television station al-Jazeera in which she urged the UK Government to withdraw its troops from Iraq and not to deploy troops to Central Iraq. Margaret Hassan has lived in Iraq for 32 years. She is married to an Iraqi and has both Iraqi and British passports.

A seven-year-old Lebanese boy, Mohammad Hamad, was abducted by armed men on 23 October while walking home from school in the Diyala province, east of Baghdad. The kidnappers have demanded a \$150,000 ransom from his father to release him. They have given an ultimatum that they would behead the boy if the father fails to pay the money by 30 October.

A Polish woman, known so far as Teresa, and who is a long-term resident of Iraq, was kidnapped by armed men from her home in Baghdad on the night of 27 October. Her captors have called on the Polish Government to withdraw its troops otherwise they will kill her. A 24-year-old Japanese national, Shosei Koda, was also kidnapped on 27 October. His captors released a video on al-Jazeera threatening that they would kill him within 48 hours if Japanese troops are not withdrawn from Iraq.

Over the past seven months, dozens of foreigners of different nationalities, mostly civilians including aid workers, journalists, truck drivers and private contractors have been abducted and taken hostage by various armed groups operating in Iraq to exert pressure on their governments or employers to either withdraw troops from Iraq or stop all commercial activities in the country. Many of the hostages have been killed. Scores of Iraqis, especially children, have also been kidnapped by criminal gangs with a view of extorting ransoms from families.

Armed groups are bound by Article 3 common to the Fourth Geneva Convention of 1949, which reflects customary international law, and which prohibits the taking of hostages and the torture, mutilation, cruel treatment, humiliation or execution of prisoners. Amnesty International calls on these groups to urgently comply with these principles in all circumstances.

