

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL PRESS RELEASE

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Iraq: Civilians under fire

Amnesty International is deeply concerned about the mounting toll of civilian casualties in Iraq and the reported use of cluster bombs by US forces in heavily populated areas. Despite repeated assurances from US and UK authorities that they would do everything possible to protect the Iraqi people, since 20 March hundreds of civilians have reportedly been killed. Some have been victims of cluster bombs; some have died in attacks in disputed circumstances. The attacks in the vicinity of civilian targets continue and are likely to escalate as fighting moves into Baghdad.

"We urge all the warring parties to make the safety of the Iraqi civilians a top priority," Amnesty International said.

"The attack at al-Hilla's hospital on 1 April was an example of indiscriminate killing of civilians and a grave violation of international humanitarian law," Amnesty International emphasized.

The bodies of the men, women and children -- both dead and alive -- brought to the hospital were punctured with shards of shrapnel from cluster bombs. Two lorry-loads of dead civilians, including women in flowered dresses, were seen outside the hospital.

Injured survivors reported how the explosives fell "like grapes" from the sky, and how bomblets bounced through the windows and doors of their homes before exploding.

Both Amnesty International and Landmine Action, a UK-based non-governmental organization, have confirmed that pictures from al-Hilla show unexploded BLU97 -- a cluster submunition, and that this is the same air-dropped weapon that caused severe humanitarian problems in Afghanistan and Kosovo in the past.

"The devastating consequences of using cluster bombs in civilian areas are utterly predictable. If, as accounts suggest, US forces dropped cluster bombs in residential areas of al-Hilla, even if they were directed at military targets, this would be a grave breach of international humanitarian law," Amnesty International said. "An independent and thorough investigation must be held and those found responsible for any violations of the laws of war should be brought to justice. The US and UK authorities should order an immediate halt to the further use of cluster bombs. "

Iraqi civilians have also been placed at greater risk of being killed or injured by US and UK forces as a result of tactics used by the Iraqi military that violate international humanitarian law, such as perfidious attacks. Amnesty International is also concerned about reports that Iraq has been locating military forces and weaponry in close proximity to civilians in order to shield them from attack.

"International humanitarian law requires both defenders and attackers to take measures necessary to protect civilians," the organization said.

"All parties to the conflict in Iraq have a responsibility to ensure that the humanitarian needs of the civilian population are fully met. We call on all parties to the conflict to facilitate access and the operations of humanitarian organizations, without delay," Amnesty International continued.

Amnesty International calls for:

an immediate moratorium on the use of cluster bombs by US/UK forces and on other inherently indiscriminate weapons;

an immediate end to unlawful tactics by Iraqi forces that endanger civilians;

prompt and impartial investigations into civilian deaths, and the use of the International Humanitarian Fact-Finding Commission to investigate incidents of alleged serious violations of international humanitarian law.

To download the report "Iraq: Civilians under fire" please go to <http://web.amnesty.org/ai.nsf/recent/MDE140712003!Open>

For more information, download Amnesty International's previous press releases on the use of cluster bombs:

<http://www.web.amnesty.org/ainsf/recent/mde140652003>

<http://www.web.amnesty.org/ainsf/recent/act790062003>

<http://www.web.amnesty.org/ainsf/recent/mde140502003>

To see an interview with Amnesty International's military expert, go to <http://emedial.amnesty.org/mines.ram>

To see an interview with Secretary General Irene Khan on cluster bombs go to http://emedial.amnesty.org/IK_clusterbombs.ram

For more information on the Iraq Crisis go to http://web.amnesty.org/pages/iraq_summary and for latest news releases and 24 hour media contacts go to <http://news.amnesty.org>

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