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AI INDEX: MDE 14/07/96

3 SEPTEMBER 1996 -- FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

NORTHERN IRAQ: REPORTS OF HUMAN RIGHTS VIOLATIONS COULD BE START OF PURGE OF OPPOSITION GROUPS BY IRAQI GOVERNMENT

Amnesty International is alarmed at reports of human rights violations committed during and after the recent capture on 31 August 1996 by Iraqi troops -- alongside a major Kurdish faction, the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) -- of the city of Arbil in Northern Iraq, which had been under the control of the rival Kurdish faction, the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK).

“Reports of unlawful killings and arbitrary arrests of PUK members and of suspected Iraqi opposition activists raise fears that this could be the start of a purge by the Iraqi Government of groups politically opposed to it and whose members had gone into hiding in the Kurdish-controlled zone,” Amnesty International said today.

While Amnesty International has been unable so far to directly confirm these reports, it has documented over the years severe and brutal human rights violations perpetrated by the Iraqi Government against the Kurdish population and other opposition groups.

Such violations by the Iraqi military, intelligence and security personnel include the 1988 campaign against the Kurdish population using chemical weapons; the brutal suppression of an uprising in southern Iraq in the aftermath of the 1991 Gulf war; and a continuous repression of suspected political activists in Iraq using methods that include extrajudicial executions, torture in custody, disappearances and prolonged incommunicado detention. The recent reports therefore raise fears of new violations. These reports have been taken from a wide variety of sources, including people who have fled the area in recent days.

According to the reports, Iraqi troops have executed 96 members of an Iraqi opposition group, the Iraqi National Congress (INC), in the Koshtape suburb of Arbil after capturing them on 31 August. Amnesty International has received the names of 20 of the alleged victims, who like the rest, were reportedly executed in public. They are mainly non-Kurdish Iraqis in opposition to the government in Baghdad, some of whom were reportedly army deserters.

Amnesty International has also received reports that Iraqi intelligence forces have captured leading members of the PUK from the city of Arbil, including military officers and male and female civilians. It has received the names of five people allegedly in custody.

In addition, following the withdrawal of Iraqi military troops from Arbil on 2 September 1996, members of the Iraqi intelligence forces are said to have stayed behind in the city where they reportedly rounded up suspected Iraqi opposition activists, including PUK and non-Kurdish individuals, and transferred them to towns outside the Kurdish-controlled areas.

The human rights organization has also received the names of three military and civilian INC members who are among 150 people reportedly held in KDP custody and undergoing interrogation by Iraqi intelligence forces in the KDP-controlled city of Salaheddin.

Amnesty International therefore urges the humane treatment of detainees held by either of the warring factions, or by Iraqi forces. The organization is also calling on all the parties as well as on forces of any other states who may become involved in the conflict to ensure the safety of the civilian population and to abide strictly by the minimum standards set down in international humanitarian law.

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