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Iraq: The fate of 106 religious clerics and students still unknown after ten years

On the eve of the tenth anniversary of the arrest of 106 Shi'a clerics and students from the southern city of al-Najaf by the Iraqi authorities, Amnesty International expresses its deepest concern about their whereabouts.

"Ten years have passed since these people "disappeared" and the obligation remains on the government to clarify their fate" said Amnesty International today. "So far, there has been no evidence that the 106 victims were killed during the 1991 uprising or fled to other countries, as was suggested by the Iraqi authorities in a letter sent to Amnesty International in September 1993," added the organization.

The 106 arrested in March 1991, included 44 Iraqis, 28 Iranians and 34 nationals of India, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Lebanon and Bahrain.

Amnesty International calls on the government to release immediately and unconditionally all "disappeared" detainees including the 106 clerics and students and the 600 or so Kuwaiti and other nationals who were arrested during the occupation of Kuwait from 2 August 1990 to 26 February 1991.

"It is also the duty of the authorities of India, Pakistan, Iran, Afghanistan, Bahrain and Lebanon to urge the Iraqi Government to clarify the fate of their nationals", concluded Amnesty International.

Background

The arrest of the 106 clerics and students took place in the context of the March 1991 uprising which swept across Iraq in the weeks following the end of the Iraqi occupation of Kuwait. Shi'a Muslims in southern Iraq rose against the government and the uprising quickly spread to the Kurdish towns and cities in northern Iraq. However, by the end of March 1991 government forces had largely succeeded in crushing the uprising and in the process widespread and serious human rights violations were reported, including arbitrary arrests, detention without trial, "disappearances" and extrajudicial executions. At some point an estimated two million people had fled to neighbouring Iran, Turkey and Saudi Arabia.

On 20 March 1991, Grand Ayatollah Abu al-Qassem al-Kho'i, aged 95, Shi'a Islam's most senior cleric was arrested in al-Najaf along with seven members of his family. He was detained for two days in Baghdad and returned to al-Najaf where he remained under house arrest until his death in 1992. In the following days the Iraqi authorities arrested 107 people, students of Shi'a Islam or followers of the Grand Ayatollah. While one of them, a Pakistani national, was released in 1992, the fate and whereabouts of the other 106 remain unknown. They included Ayatollah al-Sayyid Murtadha Jawad al-Khadimi al-Khalkhali, who was 89 years old, two of his sons and three of his grandchildren, Ayatollah al-Sayyid 'Ala'uddin 'Ali Bahr al-'Uloom, aged 58, a well known religious scholar, and three of his sons, and al-Sayyid Muhammad Ridah al-Sayyid Muhsin al-Hakim, aged 65, another well known religious scholar.

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For more information please call Amnesty International's press office in London, UK, on +44 20 7413 5566

Amnesty International, 1 Easton St., London WC1X 0DW web : <http://www.amnesty.org>