

AI Index: PRE 01/168/2010
26 April 2010

Iraq's Civilians Under Fire: Better protection urgently needed

Amnesty International today called on the Iraqi authorities to urgently step up the protection of civilians amid the recent surge of deadly violence in the country.

A new Amnesty International report, *Iraq: Civilians Under Fire*, documents how hundreds of civilians are being killed or injured each month. Many are specifically targeted by armed groups because of their religious, ethnic or sexual identity or because they speak out against human rights abuses.

Ongoing uncertainty over when a new Iraqi government will be formed has led to a recent spike in attacks, with more than 100 civilian deaths in the first week of April alone.

"Iraqis are still living in a climate of fear, seven years after the US-led invasion. The Iraqi authorities could do much more to keep them safe, but over and over they are failing to help the most vulnerable in society," said Malcolm Smart, Amnesty International's Middle East and North Africa Director.

Amnesty International is urging the authorities to do more to protect those who are particularly at risk and bring those responsible for violent crimes to justice, without recourse to the death penalty.

While Iraqi security forces, foreign troops or family members are responsible for some human rights abuses, most killings of civilians are carried out by armed groups, including al-Qa'ida in Iraq. The organization remains a significant presence in the country despite the recent reported deaths of three senior leaders.

Human rights defenders, journalists and political activists are among those who have been killed or maimed in Iraq because of their work. Omar Ibrahim Al-Jabouri, the head of public relations at Rasheed TV station, only just escaped with his life in an attack on 13 April 2010. He lost his legs after being caught in an explosion of a bomb attached to his vehicle as he was driving to his office in Baghdad.

Religious and ethnic minorities also continue to be targeted for attack, with at least eight Christians killed in Mosul in February 2010 in apparent sectarian attacks. Christian students Zia Toma, 22, and Ramsin Shmael, 21, were stopped by unidentified gunmen on 17 February 2010 at a bus stop in Mosul who demanded to see their identity cards. When the gunmen opened fire, Toma was killed and Shmael was injured but survived.

Women and girls are particularly at risk of violence from both armed groups and their relatives. Few men are known to have been convicted of rape in Iraq. Women frequently suffer at the hands of relatives, in so-called honour crimes, if their behaviour is seen to go against traditional moral codes, for instance by refusing to marry men who have been selected for them. Activists have also been targeted for speaking out in favour of women's rights.

Members of the gay community in Iraq, where homosexuality is not tolerated, live under constant threat of violence, with some Muslim clerics urging their followers to attack suspected homosexuals.

Authorities frequently fail to carry out thorough and impartial investigations into attacks on civilians, arrest suspects or bring perpetrators to justice. In some cases, they are even accused of being implicated in violent attacks.

As a result of the ongoing insecurity, hundreds of thousands of Iraqis, including a disproportionately high number of minority communities, have been forced to flee their homes. Internally displaced people and refugees are even more vulnerable to violence, as well as economic hardship.

Amnesty International is calling on the Iraqi authorities to immediately introduce measures to improve the safety of civilians. They should consult with members of at-risk groups to see how best they can protect them.

In the meantime, the authorities must begin properly investigating attacks on civilians and to hold perpetrators, whoever they are, responsible for their crimes in accordance with international law. They should immediately disarm all militias and end the identification of religious affiliation on identity cards.

All armed groups in Iraq should immediately end human rights abuses, including attacks against civilians, abductions and torture.

Amnesty International is also calling for an end of all forcible returns of refugees to Iraq as long as the country remains unstable. Several European governments are forcibly returning people to Iraq – including to the most dangerous parts of the country – in direct violation of guidelines set out by UNHCR, the UN refugee agency.

Amnesty International has spoken to several Iraqis who were forcibly returned by the Netherlands government on 30 March 2010. Among the 35 refugees was a 22-year-old Shi'a Turkoman man from Tal Afar, a city north of Mosul, where hundreds of civilians have been killed in sectarian or other politically motivated violence in recent years, and where the violence continues unabated. As of mid-April, he remained stranded in Baghdad.

“The continuing uncertainty as to when a new government will be formed following last month’s election could well contribute to a further increase of violent incidents of which civilians are the main victims. The uncertainty is threatening to make a bad situation even worse. Both the Iraqi authorities and the international community must act now to prevent more unnecessary deaths,” said Malcolm Smart.

Note to editors:

Case studies outlined in Iraq: Civilians Under Fire include:

1. Sardar Qadir, a businessman and Goran candidate in Iraq’s parliamentary elections, was wounded in the leg on 4 December 2009 when he was shot at through a window at a relative’s home in the Iskan district of Sulaimaniya. He told Amnesty International that he had not received threats but that he thought he had been followed in the preceding weeks and that the attack was politically motivated.

“I cannot put the blame on any particular party. However, I am a victim of the lack of democracy we are suffering from.”

2. In April 2009, Amnesty International interviewed several Iraqis who had recently fled due to the violence they were facing because they were gay men. Hakim, a 34-year-old man from Najaf, reported that his partner had been kidnapped and abused by members of the Mahdi Army in October 2008, apparently

after they had found out about their secret relationship. Following his release, both men received death threats from the Mahdi Army, including on one occasion a note that was delivered with three bullets.

3. Kurdistan Aziz was 16 years old when she disappeared in May 2008 from her home in the Kolkarash village near Heran, Erbil. In February she had run away with her lover but later returned to her family after they signed an agreement guaranteeing her safety. On 21 May 2008, her father informed the local police his nephew had confessed to her murder. As of early 2010, he remained at large.