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Iraq: Amnesty International exposes recent abuses

“...they forced me to lay down on the floor. The hooded man started beating the soles of my feet with a cable. A few minutes later I lost consciousness... Every night from 12 until around 4 am they would call me into the interrogation room and would do the same thing ... They also threatened that they would use electric shocks...”

Against all the odds “A”, a 59-year-old medical doctor in Baghdad, bribed a prison officer and fled the country. She told her story to Amnesty International just three weeks ago. Her crime? She was arrested in June 1999 on suspicion that she had contacts with an Iraqi opposition group. She denies the accusation.

“Those suspected of any involvement in opposition activities can expect to be arrested without a warrant; held in secret detention, without access to family and lawyers; be brutally tortured -- including in one case known to Amnesty International, having their eyes gouged out -- and finally, could face execution,” the human rights organization revealed in a new report today.

In its report, Amnesty International is shining a spotlight on these grave human rights violations in Iraq, that are taking place systematically and with total impunity. These violations range from arbitrary arrest and detention, to torture, extrajudicial and judicial executions after unfair trials, “disappearances” and forcible expulsions on the basis of ethnic origin.

The majority of the victims of Iraq’s relentless repression are Shi‘a Muslims in Southern Iraq and in some districts of Baghdad, as well as Kurds in the north. Summary executions are being carried out on a regular basis. The Iraqi Government rarely announces executions or makes public any official statistics in relation to the death penalty. In many cases it is impossible to determine whether the reported executions are judicial or extrajudicial given the secrecy surrounding them.

On 11 July 1999 Ibrahim Amin al-‘Azzawi, a 70-year-old lawyer, was executed. His family, who have now fled the country, believed it was because his son-in-law, Riyadh Baqer al-Hilli, a Shi‘a Muslim, was suspected of involvement in underground anti-government activities. No information on any charge, trial or sentencing was ever available. No information is available to Amnesty International either as to the fate of Riyadh, who was also arrested and taken away.

“This is the length the Iraqi security forces are prepared to go to identify any opposition views and silence them,” Amnesty International said. “This has created a climate of terror which has forced thousands of Iraqi nationals to flee the country illegally and seek asylum elsewhere.”

In the last 18 months alone, a number of prominent Shi'a Muslim clerics have been killed in Southern Iraq in circumstances suggesting that they may have been killed by government forces or forces acting on government orders. This includes the assassination of a prominent Shi'a cleric, Ayatollah Sadeq al-Sadr, on 19 February 1999, which sparked clashes between the security forces and armed Islamist opposition groups. Dozens were left dead on both sides, and arbitrary mass arrests and summary executions followed.

Thousands of Kurdish families have been forcibly expelled by the security forces from their homes in the north to areas controlled by the two Kurdish political parties in Iraqi Kurdistan on the basis of their ethnic origin.

Amnesty International is making a number of recommendations to the Iraqi Government. These include:

adopting the necessary legal and practical measures to ensure effective implementation of all the provisions contained in international human rights treaties ratified by Iraq;
releasing all political detainees held without charge or trial if they are not to be promptly charged with any recognizable criminal offence; and
stopping the policy of forcible expulsions of non-Arab families.

Amnesty International also believes that the Security Council, as the body that has imposed sanctions on Iraq, should give urgent attention to the humanitarian situation in Iraq, and take all necessary measures to protect the rights of the Iraqi population.
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**For more information please see report, *Iraq: Victims of systematic repression* (AI Index: MDE 14/10/99). Please also see *Iraq: UN Security Council considers the Humanitarian Panel's report on sanctions, 28 July* (AI Index: MDE 14/06/99).
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