

EXTRA 101/98

Fear of indiscriminate mass killing
of civilians in Iraq

16 December 1998

USA/UK/IRAQ

Amnesty International is concerned that there may be imminent military attacks against Iraq by United States of America and United Kingdom forces which could lead to indiscriminate or disproportionate killings of civilians in violation of international human rights law. This comes in the light of the report by the head of the United Nations Special Commission (UNSCOM) to the UN Security Council on 15 December 1998 about Iraq's alleged lack of full cooperation with UN weapons inspectors and the sudden evacuation from Iraq of UN staff, including UN humanitarian workers.

On 14 and 15 November, US and UK forces narrowly aborted a military attack against Iraq after it had announced on 14 November that it would resume full cooperation with UN weapons inspectors. However, both the US and UK Governments have since repeatedly indicated that military action against Iraq will be taken immediately, without a UN Security Council resolution, should it fail to cooperate with UN weapons inspectors in the future. The threat of military attacks against Iraq came after its decision on 31 October to end all cooperation with UN weapons inspectors.

Amnesty International's fears for the safety of the civilian population in Iraq have been heightened by reports which appeared recently in the US press. On 16 November the Washington Post wrote: "...[President] Clinton had been warned by the Pentagon that the attack plan would result in by far the most military undertaking of his presidency, possibly killing 10,000 Iraqis. "That was the medium case scenario", one administration official said...".

On 17 November the New York Times reported: "...Aides to Mr. Clinton said that in making his decision, he was troubled by Pentagon estimates that several thousand Iraqis, including civilians, would be killed in the air strikes, a death toll far greater than any other American military strike since the Persian Gulf war in 1991..."

Amnesty International has so far received no confirmation from US officials as to the accuracy of these reports. On 13 November the organization publicly expressed concern that civilians might be indiscriminately killed in the event of a military action against Iraq. During the Gulf War in 1991 thousands of civilians in Iraq were killed in aerial bombardment of Baghdad and other cities by US and allied forces. In one such incident more than 300 civilians were killed in the 'Amariya air raid shelter in Baghdad. In November 1998 Amnesty International wrote to the US and UK governments urging that life, safety and security of civilians must be the paramount consideration in any action taken to resolve conflicts and to ensure the protection of civilians in accordance with international humanitarian law. Amnesty International also wrote to the Iraqi government and urged that all necessary measures be taken to protect the civilian population in Iraq.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Iraq has been under UN economic sanctions since it invaded Kuwait in August 1990. Under UN Security Council resolutions, adopted in the aftermath of the 1991 Gulf War, sanctions cannot be lifted until UNSCOM declares Iraq free of chemical and biological arms and capabilities. Until September 1998 sanctions were being reviewed by the UN Security Council every two months.

In February 1998 Iraq barred some members of UNSCOM from inspecting suspected weapon sites including eight presidential palaces. As a result US and other governments threatened to take military action against Iraq but at the end of February 1998, and following a visit to Baghdad by the UN Secretary General, Kofi Annan, Iraq signed a memorandum of understanding with the UN Security Council and agreed to allow access to all suspected weapon sites.

In August 1998 Iraq announced its decision to suspend cooperation with UNSCOM. The UN Security Council responded by adopting resolution 1194 in September, suspending any review of sanctions until Iraq reversed its decision. On 31 October Iraq announced that it was halting all cooperation with UN weapons inspectors. A military action by US and UK forces was avoided after Iraq had announced full cooperation with UNSCOM on 14 November.

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Please send telegrams/E-mails/faxes/express/airmail letters in English or your own language:

To the US and UK Governments:

- asking them to take into urgent consideration the risk of civilian loss of life in the event of military action against Iraq.

APPEALS TO:

Bill Clinton
President
The White House
Office of the President
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue
Washington DC 20500
United States of America

Telegrams: President, Washington DC, United States America

Faxes: + 1 202 456 2461

E-mails: president@whitehouse.gov

Salutation: Dear President

Tony Blair
Prime Minister
10 Downing Street
London SW1 2AL
United Kingdom

Telegrams: Prime Minister, London, United Kingdom

Telephone: + 44 171 270 3000

Faxes: + 44 171 925 0918 / 270 0196

Salutation: Dear Prime Minister

COPIES TO: diplomatic representatives of the US and UK accredited to your country.

PLEASE SEND APPEALS IMMEDIATELY.

Amnesty International members in the UK and US are requested not to write appeals to their own governments on this issue.