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Amnesty International appeals to the US and UK governments over fear of indiscriminate killings of civilians in Iraq

Amnesty International launched today urgent worldwide appeals to the US and UK governments reminding them that life, safety and security of civilians must be paramount in any action taken to resolve the new crisis over Iraq.

“Imminent military attacks by US and UK forces could lead to indiscriminate or disproportionate killings of civilians. The experience of previous armed intervention in the Gulf has shown that, all too often, civilians become the acceptable casualties of war. All governments have an obligation to respect and protect civilian life”, Amnesty International said.

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 insure 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.

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.

Amnesty International’s fear of imminent attacks comes in the light of the report by the head of the UN Special Commission (UNSCOM) to the UN Security Council on 15 December about Iraq’s reported lack of full cooperation with UN weapons inspectors and the sudden evacuation from Iraq of UN staff, including UN humanitarian workers.

Last month, 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 in November in the US press. On 16 November 1998 the US newspaper, the Washington Post, reported that President Clinton had been warned by the Pentagon that the initial attack plan would result in by far the most deadly military undertaking of his presidency, possibly killing 10,000 Iraqis.

On 17 November 1998, another US newspaper, the New York Times, wrote: *"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 newspaper reports. On 13 November the organization publicly expressed concern that civilians might be indiscriminately killed in the event of a military action against Iraq.

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