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## **Iraq: Still paying a high price after a decade of abuses**

Ten years after the US-led invasion that toppled the brutal regime of Saddam Hussein, Iraq remains enmeshed in a grim cycle of human rights abuses, including attacks on civilians, torture of detainees and unfair trials, said Amnesty International in a new report out today.

A decade of abuses exposes a chronology of torture and other ill-treatment of detainees committed by Iraqi security forces and by foreign troops in the wake of the 2003 invasion.

It highlights the Iraqi authorities' continuing failure to observe their obligations to uphold human rights and respect the rule of law in the face of persistent deadly attacks by armed groups, who show callous disregard for civilian life.

"Ten years after the end of Saddam Hussein's repressive rule, many Iraqis today enjoy greater freedoms than they did under his Ba'athist regime, but the fundamental human rights gains that should have been achieved during the past decade have signally failed to materialize," said Hassiba Hadj Sahraoui, Middle East and North Africa Deputy Director at Amnesty International.

"Neither the Iraqi government nor the former occupying powers have adhered to the standards required of them under international law and the people of Iraq are still paying a heavy price for their failure."

Torture is rife and committed with impunity by government security forces, particularly against detainees suspected of offences under anti-terrorism legislation while they are held incommunicado for interrogation.

Detainees have alleged that they were tortured to force them to "confess" to serious crimes or to incriminate others while held in these conditions. Many have repudiated their confessions at trial only to see the courts admit them as evidence of their guilt, without investigating their torture allegations, sentencing them to long term imprisonment or death.

Adding to the injustice, the authorities have paraded detainees before press conferences or arranged for their "confessions" to be broadcast on local television in advance of their trials or trial verdicts in gross breach of the presumption of innocence and of the right of every accused to receive a fair trial.

The death penalty was suspended after the 2003 invasion but quickly restored by the first Iraqi government on coming to power, and executions resumed in 2005.

Since then, at least 447 prisoners have been executed, including Saddam Hussein, some of his main associates, and alleged members of armed groups.

Hundreds of prisoners await execution on death row. Iraq, where 129 prisoners were hanged in 2012, is now one of the world's leading executioners.

“Death sentences and executions are being used on a horrendous scale,” said Hadj Sahraoui, “It is particularly abhorrent that many prisoners have been sentenced to death after unfair trials and on the basis of confessions they say they were forced to make under torture.

“It is high time that the Iraqi authorities end this appalling cycle of abuse and declare a moratorium on executions as a first step towards abolishing the death penalty for all crimes.”

Since December, thousands of demonstrators have taken to the streets in areas where Sunni Muslims are in the majority, to protest against arbitrary detention, abuses of detainees, the use of the anti-terror law, and an end to what they see as government discrimination against the Sunni population.

Meanwhile, Sunni armed groups continue to attack not only government targets but Shi’a civilians, including religious pilgrims.

Although the Kurdistan Region in north-east Iraq has remained largely free of the violence that has engulfed the rest of the country, its two ruling Kurdish political parties maintain a tight grip on power and incidents of detainee abuses have also been reported.

The removal of Saddam Hussein in 2003 should have been followed by a process of fundamental human rights reform but almost from day one the occupying forces began committing torture and other serious violations against prisoners, as the Abu Ghraib scandal involving US forces and the beating to death of Baha Mousa in the custody of British soldiers in Basra graphically demonstrated,” said Hadj Sahraoui.

In the UK and the USA, despite investigations into individual cases, there has been a failure to investigate systematically the widespread human rights violations committed by forces from those countries, and to hold those responsible to account at all levels. Iraqi victims of US human rights violations have found the route to remedy in the US courts blocked.

The Iraqi authorities have periodically acknowledged torture and other ill-treatment but they have generally sought to explain them away as isolated occurrences or, in a few high profile cases, have announced official inquiries whose outcomes, if any, subsequently were never revealed.

Yet, as Amnesty International’s report shows, torture and other abuse of detainees has been one of the most persistent and widespread features of Iraq’s human rights landscape, and the government shows little inclination either to recognize its extent or take the measures necessary to consign such grave abuses to the past.

Methods of torture reported by detainees include, electric shocks applied to the genitals and other parts of the body, partial suffocation by having a bag placed tightly over the head, beatings while suspended in contorted positions, deprivation of food, water and sleep, and threats of rape or that their female relatives will be detained and raped. Women detainees are particularly vulnerable and the report cites several cases in which women have alleged that they were sexually abused in detention.

“Iraq remains caught in a cycle of torture and impunity that should long ago have been broken,” said Hadj Sahraoui. “It is high time that the Iraqi authorities take the concrete steps needed to entrench a culture of human rights protection, and do so without further prevarication or delay.”

### **About this report:**

Amnesty International’s report is based on information gathered from multiple sources, including interviews with detainees, victims’ families, refugees, lawyers, human rights activists and others, plus reviews of court papers and other official documents. Some of this was obtained through field research in the Kurdistan Region, as well as a visit to Baghdad last September when the organization met officials of the Ministry of Human Rights and the Supreme Judicial Council. Amnesty International sent its latest findings to the government in December 2012 but has yet to receive any response.