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Iraq: Impartial investigation of Camp Ashraf deaths crucial

Amnesty International urges the Iraqi authorities to conduct a thorough and impartial investigation into violence at Camp Ashraf that reportedly left at least 47 dead on 1 September.

“On previous occasions the Iraqi authorities have failed to conduct effective investigations into attacks on camps housing Iranian exiles. This has meant that no one has been held accountable for these incidents, and that residents live in constant fear for their safety,” said Hassiba Hadj Sahraoui, Deputy Director for the Middle East and North Africa at Amnesty International.

“The authorities must ensure that an inquiry into yesterday’s violence is promptly carried out and that it is independent, transparent and in full conformity with international standards.”

The circumstances of the event are disputed. Residents claim that Iraqi security forces attacked the camp and killed several residents. Several victims were allegedly arrested and hand-cuffed before being shot dead. However, Iraqi officials have provided different accounts of what happened, including blaming infighting among camp residents.

Some 100 Iranian exiles remained at Camp Ashraf, after most of the camp’s inhabitants were relocated to Camp Liberty in north eastern Baghdad in recent years.

Earlier this year deadly attacks were launched against Camp Liberty. On 15 June 2013 Camp Liberty, now home to more than 3000 Iranian exiles, came under rocket attack. Two residents were killed and dozens were wounded. An earlier rocket attack on Camp Liberty on 9 February 2013 left eight residents dead and scores wounded. No effective investigations are known to have been conducted into either attack.

A leader of the Mukhtar Army, a Shi’a militia, has told the media on several occasions that his group was responsible for attacks on Camp Liberty. Despite these admissions, no effective measures to prevent possible attacks by the Mukhtar Army against the Iranian exiles are known to have been taken by the Iraqi authorities

“The failure of the Iraqi authorities to investigate and bring to justice those allegedly responsible for previous attacks is unacceptable and is putting lives at risk,” said Hassiba Hadj Sahraoui. “The government of Iraq is responsible for the safety and security of all the residents of Camp Liberty and Camp Ashraf and must take immediate measures to ensure their protection.”

Background:

Camp Ashraf previously housed some 3400 Iranian exiles, mostly members and supporters of the People’s Mojahedin Organisation of Iran (PMOI) who were allowed to move to Iraq by Saddam Hussain’s government in the 1980s.

After the March 2003 US-led invasion of Iraq the Camp and its residents were placed under US protection but this ended in mid-2009 following an agreement between the US authorities and the Iraqi government. Barely a month later, on 28-29 July 2009, Iraqi security forces stormed the camp; at least nine residents were killed and many more were injured. Thirty-six residents who were detained were allegedly tortured and beaten.

In April 2011, Iraqi troops stormed Camp Ashraf in Diyala governorate. The troops used excessive force, including live ammunition, against the residents who tried to resist them. At least 36 people were killed and more than 300 injured. The government failed to conduct a prompt, thorough, independent, and impartial investigation into the incident, in breach of international standards, including the UN Principles on the Effective Prevention and Investigation of Extra-legal, Arbitrary and Summary Executions.

In 2011 the Iraqi government announced the closure of Camp Ashraf after relocating its residents to a new location, Camp Liberty in north-east of Baghdad. After the majority of residents had been relocated about 100 people were allowed to stay behind in Camp Ashraf in order to resolve remaining property issues.

According to a December 2011 memorandum of understanding between the UN and the government of Iraq, the UNHCR may process requests for international protection from residents of the camps. Those residents who apply for international protection are asylum seekers under international law.