

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL

REGIONAL UPDATE

Under strict embargo for 05:01 GMT, 28 May 2008

28 May 2008

Annual Report 2008 – Middle East and North Africa Regional Update Selected events covering the period from January to April 2008

A new, long-planned Arab Charter of Human Rights came into force in March containing some progressive but also limiting human rights provisions. As it was about to take effect, Information Ministers of Arab states adopted a resolution calling for new limits to be imposed on satellite TV broadcasters in the region, threatening the increased flow of public information promoted by satellite TV.

People under fire

Violence continued particularly in Iraq and in Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories, and the brunt continued to fall on civilians taking no part in conflict. In early May, a confrontation in Lebanon between Hizbullah-led groups and pro-government forces caused the deaths of at least 62 people, including at least four civilians.

Iraq

The level of sectarian and other killings fell below previous peaks but remained high, and there was no significant improvement in the lives of people on the ground. Armed groups opposed to the government and the presence of the US-led MultiNational Force continued to carry out bomb and other attacks, including in heavily populated areas. In March and April, hundreds of people – including unarmed civilians – were killed in clashes between Iraqi government forces, operating with US support, and the Mahdi Army, armed Shi'a militia loyal to Moqtada al-Sadr.

In April, the trial began of eight former officials, including former Deputy Prime Minister Tariq Aziz, before the Supreme Iraqi Criminal Tribunal, which previously sentenced to death Saddam Hussein and other former officials in his government after unfair trials.

Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories

More than 330 Palestinians, more than half of them civilians and including young children, were killed in Israeli attacks, mostly in the Gaza Strip, in the first four months of 2008. In the same period, 14 Israeli civilians and nine soldiers were killed in attacks by Palestinian armed groups, who fired "qassam" and other rockets into southern Israel.

Despite US-led efforts to achieve a resolution of the long-running Israeli-Palestinian conflict following talks at Annapolis in November 2007, the Israeli authorities continued to build the 700km wall/fence, to expand illegal Israeli settlements in the West Bank, to demolish Palestinian homes in East Jerusalem, the Jordan Valley and elsewhere, and more than 500 military roadblocks continued to restrict or impede the movement of Palestinians between towns and villages throughout the West Bank

The continuing Israeli blockade of the Gaza Strip had an increasingly disastrous impact on the one and a half million people who live there. The UN reported in April 2008 that more than 80 per cent of Gaza's population had become dependent on emergency food aid, and the economy was in ruins. The Israeli authorities allowed in limited amount of international humanitarian assistance and fuel but some chronically sick Gaza residents were prevented from leaving to

obtain specialist medical treatment. A brief respite in January, when Hamas militants blew a hole in the border wall between Gaza and Egypt, allowing thousands of residents to pour into Egypt to purchase badly needed supplies, lasted only a few days.

Death penalty

Algeria co-sponsored the UN General Assembly resolution calling for a worldwide moratorium on executions and several other Arab states abstained, but the death penalty continued to be used extensively in several countries.

The authorities in Iran and Saudi Arabia were among the world's foremost executioners; by the end of April, Amnesty International had recorded 83 executions in Iran and 56 in Saudi Arabia, often after flagrantly abusive trials. In Iran, the authorities took the welcome step of banning public executions in January, but in Saudi Arabia public beheading continued. In Iraq, at least 30 people were reported to have been executed, including 28 in April alone.

Counter terror with justice

Throughout the region, governments continued to exploit heightened insecurity engendered by the "war on terror" to clamp down on opposition, using secret, long-term and incommunicado detention, torture and other ill-treatment and trials before blatantly unfair courts. In Egypt, the government clamped down on the Muslim Brotherhood in the run up to delayed local and municipal elections in April; hundreds were arrested, including prospective candidates. Shortly after the election, prison sentences were imposed on leading members of the group after an unfair trial before a military court.

Although thousands of detainees held by the US-led MultiNational Force in Iraq were released, more than 20,000 continued to be held, most without charge or trial. By the end of April, the Iraqi government was reported to have released thousands of detainees it held - including under an amnesty law agreed by the parliament in February, but torture and ill-treatment of detainees remained common.

In Libya, the authorities were reported to have released 90 members of the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group (LIFG), an Islamist group, who had generally been convicted in unfair trials in previous years, though they continued to hold twice as many others.

All across the region, terrorism suspects were arrested and detained, at risk of torture and ill-treatment and faced trials before courts whose procedures often were blatantly unfair. In Tunisia, judgment was delivered in February on the appeals of 30 people who were convicted on terrorism charges in December 2007; the appeal court confirmed one of the two death sentences that had been imposed but commuted the other. In Saudi Arabia, hundreds, possibly thousands, of terrorism suspects were believed to be detained under conditions of near total secrecy.

European governments continued to return suspected terrorists to countries such as Algeria and Tunisia despite compelling grounds to fear that they would be at risk of torture. But in February, in a case arising from an Italian government attempt to return a terrorism suspect to Tunisia, the European Court of Human Rights strongly reaffirmed the prohibition on states returning individuals to countries where they would be at risk of torture. In the UK, government efforts to return terrorism suspects to Libya and Jordan despite the risk of torture were similarly thwarted by the courts.

Freedom of expression / repression of dissent

In Iran, elections to the Majles, the national parliament, in March were marked by the disbarment of many reformists and other potential candidates by the powerful, clerically dominated Council of Guardians. They were held against a background of continuing widespread human rights violations, including arrests, detentions and torture or other ill-treatment of political activists, advocates of the rights of ethnic and religious minorities, campaigners for women's rights and human rights defenders. In Syria, there were more arrests

of leading signatories of the Damascus Declaration calling for peaceful, democratic reform, most of whom were reported to have been beaten during interrogation.

Government critics, advocates of reform and human rights defenders continued to be imprisoned, arrested or harassed across the region – including in Libya, Tunisia, Yemen, Saudi Arabia and other countries. In Algeria, a leading human rights lawyer was given a suspended prison sentence and fined for criticising the prolonged detention without trial of one of his clients. In Morocco, eight members of the Moroccan Association for Human Rights who had been sentenced in 2007 to between two and four years' imprisonment for chanting slogans critical of the monarchy were pardoned by the King in April 2008 and released.

Displaced people

In Iraq sectarian and other violence continued to displace millions – both internally and as refugees in Syria, Jordan and other countries.

Within Iraq, those most at risk included Palestinian refugees who faced particular difficulties in gaining access to the main host countries for refugees from the conflict; in April several hundred remained marooned in dreadful conditions at Al-Tanf camp, located in a sliver of no-man's land between the borders of Iraq and Syria, and at least 2000 were still in al-Waleed camp on the Iraq side of the border with Syria, where living conditions were extremely harsh. In Egypt, security forces targeted refugees and migrants from Sudan and other African countries who sought to cross the border into Israel; at least 11 were killed, many others were injured and scores were arrested.

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Under embargo until 05:01 GMT, 25 May 2008