

IRAQ: Rights groups urge transparency

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Dispatch from Iraq,

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BAGHDAD, 17 November (IRIN) - International human rights organisations have appealed to the Iraqi government to proceed fairly and transparently with investigations into the alleged torture of 173 detainees found in a government building on 13 November.

"There are many reports concerning torture and other abuses of Iraqi prisoners since the US occupation, and Amnesty urges the Iraqi government to find out those responsible for these acts," Nicole Choueiry, spokeswoman for human rights watchdog Amnesty International (AI), said on Wednesday.

"Human rights should be respected, regardless of ethnicity or religion, and this case just makes the situation much worse," she added. "It requires urgent action by the government to investigate this and other reported cases."

The prisoners, many of them bearing signs of malnutrition and mistreatment, were found by US troops at an Interior Ministry building in the capital, Baghdad. In response, Iraqi Prime Minister Ibrahim al-Jafari ordered an investigation into the allegations of abuse.

Salah Ali, a police officer who helped transfer the prisoners after their discovery, was horrified by what he saw.

"They were dead people walking. Some of them had infections on their arms and legs from open injuries caused by torture."

Salah Ali, a police officer

"They were dead people walking," he said. "Some of them had infections on their arms and legs from open injuries caused by torture."

Saleh Ahmed, a senior official at the Ministry of Human Rights, noted that the situation concerning Iraqi prisoners had been a problem since the US-led occupation began in 2003.

He added that local militia groups, such as the Badr army, were notorious for violating human rights laws. The Badr army is the military wing of the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq, a religious faction that forms part of the country's majority Shi'ite government.

"The many brigades and armies taking control of the country have caused detainees to suffer, due to ethnically-driven revenge following the end of the Saddam Hussein regime," Ahmed explained.

Most of the detainees found on 13 November were Sunnis, who often accuse rival segments of the Iraqi army, particularly the Badr army and the elite Wolf Brigade, of detaining, torturing and killing them on religious grounds.

"We call for an international investigation and the intervention of the United Nations, because there are hundreds of similar cases going unreported," said Ayad Samaraye, a spokesman for the Sunni Islamic Party.

The head of the Badr army, Haid al-Amery, said on Thursday that the army had nothing to do with the recently discovered detainees. He accused US forces of using the revelation to divert attention from their own abuses in the notorious Abu Ghraib prison.

"The Americans are interfering in investigations and trying to tarnish the honour of our army," al-Amery said.

Brigadier Hussein Kalef, a Badr army senior officer, said the group had been working to ensure that insurgents ceased

their militant actions in the country, insisting it would remain on Baghdad's streets until insurgent attacks came to an end.

"The reality is that everyone wants to cover their guilt and blame someone else. During investigations, more dirty actions by groups inside the government will be discovered," Kalef said.

Iraq's deputy Interior Minister Hussein Kamal noted that similar techniques of torture were used during the regime of former President Saddam Hussein. "The same tactics could be seen in the way these men were brutally beaten, while others had their skin peeled off," he said.

UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan expressed concern about the discovery of the detainees, and welcomed the investigation.

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Kofi Annan

"The United Nations has repeatedly expressed concern about ongoing human rights violations in Iraq, and specifically the lack of due process for detainees and abuses against them," Annan said in a statement.

The Iraqi Red Crescent Society said hundreds of families searching for missing relatives had received information that they had been allegedly taken by Ministry of Interior officials.

"Every time I ask for my son in the Ministry of Interior, they tell me that it's better to pray for him in case he is guilty, and they never tell me where he is," Hamida Mustafa, the mother of one prisoner, said.

More than 900 relatives of prisoners held by Iraqi security forces demonstrated on the streets of Baghdad on Wednesday appealing for an urgent investigation into the treatment of all detainees in prisons across the country.

Leith Kubba, the spokesman for the Iraqi Prime Minister, said the government was shocked by the discovery, and added that torture was an offence against the beliefs and tactics of the new, democratic Iraqi government.

"We all are shocked by this inhuman behaviour and we will make every effort to be transparent and guarantee a fair investigation," Kubba said.