

Routine torture on in Iraqi jails: HRW

REUTERS, Baghdad

Iraqi authorities routinely torture prisoners, a leading human rights group said yesterday, citing examples of abuse which will sound all too familiar to those who suffered under Saddam Hussein.

Prisoners have been beaten with cables and hoses, and suffered electric shocks to their earlobes and genitals, the US-based group Human Rights Watch said. Some have been starved of food and water and crammed into standing-room only cells.

"The people of Iraq were promised something better than this after the government of Saddam Hussein fell," said Sarah Leah Whitson, executive director of the group's Middle East and North Africa division.

"The Iraqi interim government is not keeping its promises to honor and respect basic human rights.

Sadly, the Iraqi people continue to suffer from a government that acts with impunity in its treatment of detainees."

Human Rights Watch said it interviewed 90 Iraqi prisoners between July and October last year, just after the government of interim Prime Minister Iyad Allawi assumed power from the US-led forces, which toppled Saddam.

Seventy-two said they had been tortured or mistreated.

"Detainees report kicking, slapping and punching, prolonged suspension from the wrists with the hands tied behind the back, electric shocks to sensitive parts of the body ... and being kept blindfolded and/or handcuffed continuously for several days," the group said in a report.

"In several cases, the detainees suffered what may be permanent physical disability."

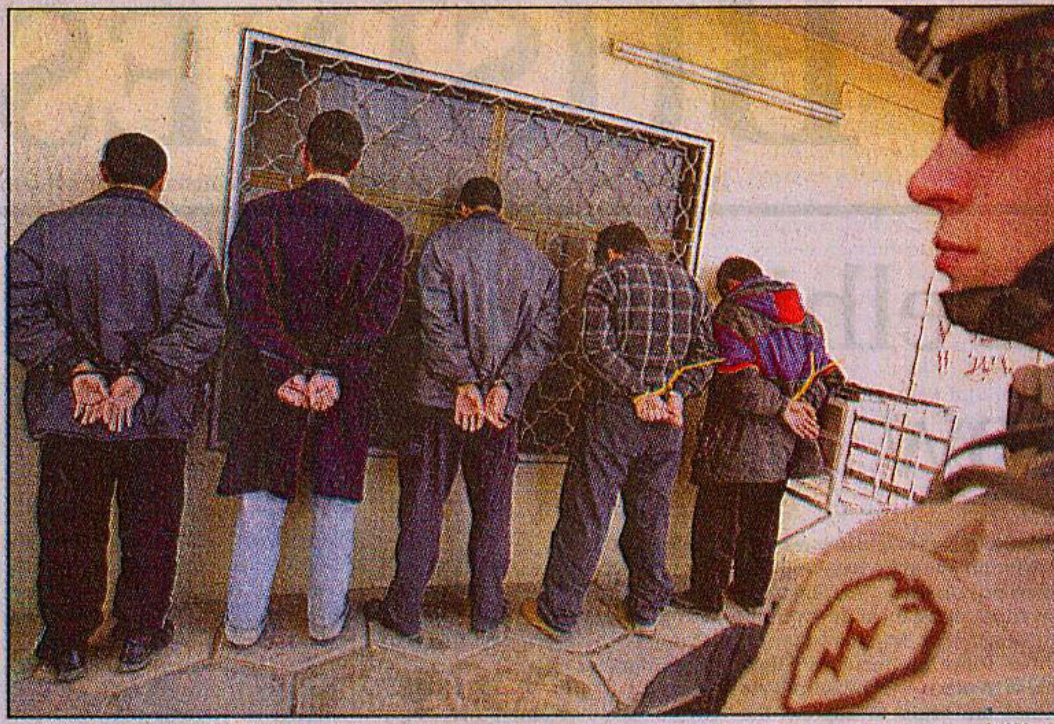
The report also said Iraq's intelligence service had violated the rights of political opponents.

It highlighted the systematic use of arbitrary arrest, pre-trial detention of up to four months, improper treatment of child detainees and abysmal conditions in pre-trial facilities.

The report follows a scandal over US treatment of prisoners in the American-run Abu Ghraib prison, which erupted last year after the discovery of photographs showing prisoners being tortured and sexually abused.

While the Human Rights Watch report looked solely at Iraqi institutions and did not address torture of prisoners by US soldiers, it said international police advisors, mostly Americans, had turned a blind eye to Iraqi abuse.

"The Iraqi security forces obviously face tremendous challenges, including an insurgency that has targeted civilians," Whitson said.



A US soldier guards a group of Iraqis detained during a raid conducted by troops from the 1st Battalion, 24th Infantry Regiment in one of the biggest petrol stations on the west side of the restive northern Iraqi city of Mosul, 370km of Baghdad yesterday. US troops raided a petrol station and arrested 12 workers in search for the owner who is suspected of supplying fuel to insurgents in the region. Soldiers broke into the owner's office seizing money and documents and carted away a big metal safe. They also took away four automatic rifles and several bullet magazines.

EU asks Pakistan to keep up peace drive

AFP, Brussels

The European Union's executive arm urged Pakistan Monday to "stay the course" in a peace drive with its neighbour India, welcoming Islamabad's role in enhancing stability in its troubled region.

European Commission chief Jose Manuel Barroso, speaking after talks with Prime Minister Shaukat Aziz in Brussels, praised his country as a "key partner" for the expanding EU.

"We appreciate the very positive role Pakistan has played in enhancing stability in this important region," he said after meeting Aziz at the start of a four-day trip to

Brussels.

EU external relations commissioner Benita Ferrero-Waldner highlighted Pakistan's efforts in a slow-moving peace process with its similarly nuclear-powered neighbour India over the last year.

"We have followed reconciliation efforts with India with great interest and look to both countries to stay the course, as this will bring tremendous benefits to the region."

She also commended Aziz for the "very constructive" role Pakistan played during presidential elections last year in Afghanistan, which is battling to rebuild itself after decades of civil war.

India, Bhutan to set up rail link

AFP, New Delhi

India and the kingdom of Bhutan signed pacts yesterday to explore building a railway linking the neighbours and to increase cooperation in agriculture and power.

The pacts were signed after talks between Bhutan's King Jigme Singye Wangchuck and Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh.

The king, who is on a six-day visit to India, will be chief guest at India's annual Republic Day parade today.

"As part of our overall strategy of upgrading ... connectivity with

Bhutan, we will conduct feasibility studies for the extension of the Indian railway network from West Bengal and Assam to the nearest border towns in Bhutan," said a statement.

The network is aimed at boosting trade and the economic development of the landlocked Buddhist nation of 734,000 people nestled between India and China.

Both sides also agreed to focus on joint power projects. India agreed to strengthen agriculture marketing systems in Bhutan and to train farmers.

India on terror alert for Republic Day parades

AFP, New Delhi

Security was stepped up across India for today's celebrations marking Republic Day, a national military and cultural showcase but also a target for terrorists.

Huge crowds gather in the federal and state capitals to watch parades and fly-pasts attended by the ruling classes, diplomats and foreign guests.

The biggest official holiday of the year has become a major target for India's myriad militant groups ranging from Islamic jihadists to separatist rebels, who reject the day as a symbol of India's unwanted dominance.

The national capital, where President Abdul Kalam will take the salute on the Imperial Rajpath, was on "heightened security alert", a police spokesman said.

Chief guest, Bhutan's King Jigme Singye Wangchuck, is himself said to be on a hit list of India's northeastern rebels after his soldiers ousted them from safe camps over the border in his Himalayan outpost.

Buildings flanking the eight kilometre (five mile) route of the parade in the capital were being

taken over by security personnel Tuesday, the Press Trust of India news agency said.

The Times of India reported that Delhi police were hunting for "the Jackal ... a lone sniper who seeks to elude multiple checks to take that one snapshot at a high-profile target, as Frederick Forsyth's assassin attempted in the celebrated thriller."

"Rooftop deployment has been doubled," the daily said on its front page.

The Times said the alert was sparked when customs officers in Calcutta seized more than 100 telescopic sights for rifles which were intended for insurgents in the northeast.

Some 25,000 personnel would be on the streets of Delhi on Wednesday, the daily added.

In restive Indian Kashmir, security forces have thrown tight cordons around planned Republic Day venues in the summer capital Srinagar and its winter twin Jammu, police said.

About 10,000 personnel have been deployed in the Jammu area, a senior police official said. Metal detectors and sniffer dogs were being used.

A bomb attack on Jammu's Maulana Azad Stadium in 1996 killed 10 people and injured scores of others.

At least 40,000 people have been killed since the outbreak of an Islamic insurgency in Kashmir in 1989, according to Indian figures.

Security has also been strengthened in seven northeastern states, where at least 10 groups are fighting for secession.

They include the outlawed United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA), which called for a boycott of Republic Day and cautioned people against boarding government buses and trains for 24 hours from Tuesday midnight.

Rebel groups in Assam have staged a string of attacks in the past week, killing six people and blowing up an oil pipeline in a show of strength.

In the main city Guwahati, a bomb squad defused a time bomb believed to have been planted by ULFA after a woman found it in a plastic bag near her home, the Press Trust of India said.

City police superintendent of police H. Nath awarded her and two relatives 10,000 rupees (210 dollars) each for their alertness.

Malaysia to call OIC summit at Saudi request

AFP, Kuala Lumpur

Malaysia, responding to a call by Saudi Arabia, has agreed to organise a summit meeting of Muslim leaders that would seek to heal rifts in the Islamic world, local media reported yesterday.

Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, chairman of the 57-member Organisation of the Islamic Conference (OIC), told Malaysian reporters accompanying him on a visit to Paris that he would dispatch his foreign minister to Riyadh to discuss the plan.

Saudi Crown Prince Abdullah bin Abdul Aziz on Friday urged Malaysia to organise a summit "so that we can overcome, with our faith in God ... the state of dismemberment and fragmentation" among Muslims.

The leaders' conference should be preceded by meetings among "the Islamic nations' thinkers and scholars ... to outline visions of the nations' future and thus assist the gathering of the leaders, which I hope will be held here, in this pure land," he said.

Pakistan bans night trains in southwest

AFP, Quetta

Pakistani railway chiefs yesterday banned all trains from running at night in an insurgency-hit southwestern province after a blast tore apart a mainline for the second time.

Timetables have been changed and trains will only run in daytime to limit the damage from any further attacks by angry nationalist tribesmen in Baluchistan demanding more political rights, jobs and royalties from the province's natural resources.

Services between Quetta, the provincial capital, and southern Karachi city resumed Tuesday after engineers repaired tracks damaged by a bomb late Monday. The same line was hit by another explosion on Saturday.

"The timing has been changed due to security concerns and no train will operate at night," Railway Deputy Controller Ghulam Rasool told AFP.

Five railway engineers were injured by Tuesday's blast near Sibi, around 150km from Quetta. Another blast earlier the same day hit a key government building in Quetta, although no one was hurt.

Immigrants still flock to NY melting pot

REUTERS, New York

Record numbers of foreigners are still settling in New York, with Bangladeshis, Mexicans and Pakistanis the fastest-growing immigrant groups in the famously diverse city, a report said on Monday.

Immigrants were not deterred by the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks and the economic downturn that followed, the 265-page City Planning Department report said.

Mexican immigration quadrupled to more than 120,000 between 1990 and 2000. Immigrants from Bangladesh, who numbered 8,695 in 1990, jumped to 42,865 in 2000, and the Pakistani population grew to 39,165 from 14,911.

Overall, New York saw a net gain of 339,000 immigrants from April 2000 to July 2003, pushing the city's foreign-born population to a record 3.2 million.

Topping the list of New York's largest foreign-born populations was the Dominican Republic at 369,186, followed by China (261,551), Jamaica (178,922) and Guyana (130,647).



Indian Border Security Force (BSF) soldiers stand guard next to a barbed wire fence in Srinagar, the main city of India's northern state of Jammu and Kashmir yesterday. Security was stepped up across India for today's Republic Day.

Lanka seeks Tiger support for tsunami relief

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka said yesterday it was awaiting a further response from Tamil Tiger rebels on possible joint tsunami relief operations after peacebroker Norway tried to clinch an arrangement.

The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) had agreed to consider President Chandrika Kumaratunga's proposal for joint action, the government said in a statement.

"The peace secretariats of the government and the LTTE have, at a technical level, been exploring ways and means of achieving this objective," the statement said.

It came a day after Norway ended a mission to Sri Lanka after apparently wringing concessions from government and rebels on the need to cooperate in distributing foreign tsunami aid.

The last of the four-person team, deputy foreign minister Vidar Helgesen, left Colombo Monday afternoon after unscheduled talks with LTTE political chief S.P. Thamilselvan.

'China-India strategic dialogue to help resolve border row'

AFP, Beijing

China said yesterday the first round of the India-China strategic dialogue would help solve the nagging border dispute between the two countries.

Asked whether he believed the talks in New Delhi this week would have a positive impact on the boundary dispute, foreign ministry spokesman Kong Quan said: "Very simply, yes."

"The two sides have expressed the goodwill to properly resolve the issue," Kong said. "We expect to work hard with India ... so bilateral relations can proceed even faster on a new foundation."

India and China fought a brief border war in 1962 that left their relations in shreds. But in recent years they have played down their territorial dispute to focus on improving commercial and other ties.

Both sides are engaged in discussions to resolve the lingering boundary issue -- a fallout of the 1962 war -- with special representatives holding several rounds of talks since June 2003.

This week's talks between delegations led by Chinese Vice Foreign Minister Wu Dawei and Indian foreign secretary Shyam Saran focused on a regional and global issues including multi-polarity, non-proliferation and terrorism.

Kong described them as "very successful," adding that they were conducive towards regional stability.

Ties between India and China have warmed since a visit to Beijing by then-premier Atal Behari Vajpayee in June 2003.

Later that year, Indian and Chinese forces took part in naval exercises off Shanghai for the first time, opening a new chapter in military ties.

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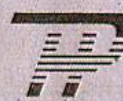
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