

AMNESTY SAYS

'Arbitrary' detention swells Iraqi abuse

AFP, London

Tens of thousands of people have been held "arbitrarily" in Iraq since the start of the US-led invasion in March 2003, creating a situation that is ripe for abuse, Amnesty International said today.

Most of those held were neither charged nor faced trial and had no basic right to challenge their detention, the London-based human rights group said as it launched a new report "Beyond Abu Ghraib: Detention and Torture in Iraq".

"Nearly three years after the US and allied forces invaded Iraq and toppled the government of Saddam Hussein, the human rights situation in the country remains dire," it said.

"The deployment of US-led forces in Iraq and the armed response that engendered has resulted in thousands of deaths of civilians and widespread abuses amid the ongoing conflict."

The report details what AI calls "human rights violations for which the US-led MNF (multi-national force) is directly responsible" as well as those increasingly committed by Iraqi security forces.

"The record of these forces, including US forces and their United Kingdom allies, is an unpalatable one," they note.

It added: "Since the invasion of Iraq in March 2003, tens of thousands of people have been detained by foreign forces, mainly the US forces, without being charged or tried and without the right to challenge their detention before a judicial body."

Quoting MNF figures, AI said there were more than 14,000 security detainees in coalition custody at the end of November 2005.

Some 4,710 were held at Abu Ghraib prison with 138 at Camp Cropper – both in Baghdad – 7,365 at Camp Bucca, near Basra, and

1,176 at Fort Suse, near Suleimaniya.

A further 650 were held at other military facilities elsewhere in Iraq.

"Some of the detainees had been held for more than two years without any effective remedy or recourse; others have been released without explanation or apology or reparation after months of detention, victims of a system that is arbitrary and a recipe for abuse," AI said.

It charged the multi-national force (MNF) of depriving detainees of human rights guaranteed in international law and standards, claiming about 750 people held from before Saddam was toppled had still not been charged or tried.

Iraqi authorities were also accused of riding roughshod over international conventions by using torture and ill-treatment in detention facilities.

US, UK may quit Iraq in 2007

Military denies report

REUTERS, Baghdad

Media reports that America and Britain plan to pull all their troops out of Iraq by the spring of 2007 are "completely false," the US military in Iraq said yesterday, reiterating there is no timetable for withdrawal.

Two British newspapers reported in their Sunday editions that the pull-out plan followed an acceptance by the two governments that the presence of foreign troops in Iraq was now a large obstacle to securing peace.

But a spokesman for the US military in Iraq reiterated previous statements by US and Iraqi officials that foreign troops will be gradually withdrawn from the Arab country once Iraqi security forces are capable of guaranteeing security.

"This news report on a withdrawal of forces within a set timeframe is completely false," Lieutenant Colonel Barry Johnson said of the stories in Britain's Sunday Telegraph and Sunday Mirror, which quoted unnamed

senior defence ministry sources.

"As we've said over and over again, any withdrawal will be linked to the ability of the Iraqi security forces to maintain domestic order on behalf of a representative Iraqi government that respects the rights of all its citizens. This is an ongoing assessment and not linked to any timeframe," he said.

There are currently about 135,000 US soldiers and Marines and about 8,500 British troops in Iraq. The full US-led coalition numbers around 160,000. Italy, with the fourth largest contingent in Iraq, has said it plans to pull out this year.

US and British troops have trained 230,000 Iraqis to take on roles in the police force and a slowly expanding Iraqi army, but both are currently incapable of securing the country on their own.

The US military withdrew around 15,000 troops after Iraq held successful elections in December for its first full-term parliament since the overthrow of Saddam Hussein in 2003.



PHOTO: AFP

Pakistani men gather after clashes between security forces and pro-Taliban militants at Miranshah in the North Waziristan tribal district yesterday. At least 50 pro-Taliban militants and five Pakistani soldiers were killed in clashes in the restive tribal region bordering Afghanistan.

Thaksin rivals vow not to end protest until his resignation

AFP, Bangkok

Opponents of Thai Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra vowed yesterday not to end their protests until he resigns, as police warned of possible violence at demonstrations expected to draw tens of thousands of people.

"We will camp there until we get the answer from Thaksin," Suriyasai Katsala, spokesman for the anti-Thaksin People's Alliance for Democracy, told AFP.

"If the police don't allow us to stay at the venue, we have the right to disobey their orders," he warned.

Tens of thousands of people are expected to join the protest from 4:00 pm (0900 GMT), with 5,000 police on hand and another 5,000 on alert.

Political tensions ran high in Bangkok this weekend as Thaksin and his rivals staged dueling mass rallies just two days apart in the same Sanam Luang field near the royal palace.

Organisers of the rally Sunday said they planned to march from Sanam Luang to Democracy Monument about one kilometer (half a mile) away, where Suriyasai said they would camp for days if necessary until Thaksin steps down.



PHOTO: AFP

Protesters hold banners as they shout slogans against Thai Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra during a protest at Saman Luang in Bangkok yesterday. Thai opposition staged a mass rally in Bangkok, where tens of thousands of people demanded resignation of Thaksin.

Bush wraps up South Asia trip with nuclear deal, terror assurances

AFP, Islamabad

US President George W. Bush wrapped up his maiden South Asian visit Saturday clutching a landmark nuclear deal with India and assurances from Pakistan that it will not waver in the "war on terror".

Bush launched his trip under extraordinary security on Wednesday with a surprise stop-over in Afghanistan, his first since the United States led a global campaign to overthrow the militant Taliban regime in 2001 after the September 11, 2001 terror attacks.

The centrepiece of his five-day trip was the clinching of a landmark civilian nuclear deal with India that aimed to firm up the strategic partnership between the world's most powerful and most populous democracies.

But the "war on terror" kept haunting him during the regional swing.

On Thursday, when he was meeting with Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh in New Delhi, an American diplomat and a US consulate employee were killed by a suicide bomber in the southern Pakistani city of Karachi.

A day later, while Bush travelled to the southern Indian city of Hyderabad, where nearly half of the

population are Muslim, posters of terror mastermind Osama bin Laden were held up by demonstrators opposed to US foreign policies.

Counterterrorism was a common theme in Bush's talks with Singh, Pakistani military ruler General Pervez Musharraf and Afghan President Hamid Karzai.

By working with these leaders and their peoples, "we're seizing the opportunities this new century offers and helping to lay the foundations of peace and prosperity for generations to come," Bush told Americans in a radio address from here before his return home Saturday.

Illustrating the terrorism concerns, Bush arrived in Islamabad late Friday under cover of darkness, with the window blinds of his Air Force One pulled down and the lights off to conceal its presence. He was then taken by a helicopter and billeted at the heavily fortified US embassy.

Bin Laden and his key lieutenants are believed seeking refuge in rugged mountainous tribal areas along Pakistan's border with Afghanistan. Taliban commanders are also reportedly taking sanctuary in Pakistan.

CHIRAC SAYS

West can still reach Iran deal

AFP, Riyadh

French President Jacques Chirac said yesterday the West would still reach out to Iran for a deal on its disputed nuclear file, in the first address to the Saudi consultative council by a foreign leader.

The president's wide-ranging speech in Riyadh also covered Lebanon, Syria, the Palestinian elections and reform in the conservative monarchy.

"In Iran, the voice of reason that France, the United Kingdom and Germany wanted to be heard on the nuclear file has not been heard, for

the time being," Chirac told the non-elected advisory council.

But despite the failure of negotiations between Tehran and the European Union, "the hand remains stretched out, and Iran can, at any moment, take it back by restoring its commitment to suspension of sensitive (nuclear) work".

Chirac said Iran had been "assured that it can develop its nuclear capacity for civilian purposes".

EU powers and Iran failed Friday to strike a deal in last-ditch nuclear talks that could have blocked possible UN Security Council action over Western fears Tehran is secretly

developing atomic weapons.

"Nuclear research will go on, and threats, propaganda and bullying will not affect us," Iranian foreign ministry spokesman Hamid Reza Asefi said Sunday, referring to the country's controversial uranium enrichment drive.

Chirac also expressed support for reforms undertaken by King Abdullah, whom he was to meet later Sunday, and the oil-rich monarchy's fight against al-Qaeda linked militants since the Islamists rose up against Riyadh in May 2003.

TRUCE MONITORS SAY

Lanka talks at risk after fresh killing

AFP, Colombo

Scandinavian truce monitors yesterday warned that Sri Lanka's peace process was in danger following the killing of two Tamil Tiger rebels in the first clash since ceasefire talks in Switzerland.

The Norwegian-led Sri Lanka Monitoring Mission (SLMM) said talks between the government and Tamil Tiger rebels scheduled for April could be at risk following Saturday's attack on a Tiger post by a suspected breakaway rebel faction.

"If such attacks and killings should reoccur, the SLMM fears that the next round of talks is put at stake," the outgoing SLMM chief Hagrup

Haukland said in a statement.

Haukland, who is to be replaced shortly by a Danish military officer, urged all parties to uphold their commitments in a joint statement after their last round of talks in Switzerland last month.

Tiger rebels said security forces aided the attack that killed two of their members manning a checkpoint in the restive eastern province on Saturday.

The attack was the first since the peace talks in Switzerland at which the government and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) agreed to abide by a 2002 ceasefire.

"LTTE members at this post launched a counter attack and the attackers from the Sri Lanka army

camp ran back," the LTTE said in a statement. "Ambulances were heard leaving the army camp soon after this incident."

The defence ministry denied any involvement and accused the Tigers of putting out a "meticulously fabricated" report.

The LTTE has said the government supports a breakaway rebel faction as its proxy for attacks on rebel-held areas in the north and east. The military denies the claim.

During talks in Switzerland last month, both the Tigers and Colombo agreed to stop a spate of killings since December that left at least 153 dead. The government also agreed that paramilitary units should be disarmed or disbanded.

Hamas ready to 'mend'

AFP, Moscow

The radical group Hamas admitted it would have to "change its manners" now that it was the elected representative of the Palestinian people and said it viewed its landmark visit to Russia wrapping up yesterday as a first step in that direction.

Senior Hamas leaders however maintained their uncompromising line on Israel, saying any softening of the organisation's positions would come about only with strictly reciprocal change in Israel's policies in dealing with the Palestinians.

"We don't say 'no' to everything," Mohammed Nazzal, a senior Hamas political figure accompanying Hamas leader Khaled Meshaal to Moscow, told AFP ahead of the delegation's meeting with Patriarch Alexei II, the head of the Russian

Orthodox Church, the group's last formal event in Moscow.

"We know that we are in a new phase, a new stage" following Hamas' shock victory in the January 25 Palestinian elections, he said.

"Hamas must change its manners. We know that very well. But what we are saying is that we want a response from the Israelis. If you want Hamas to change its policies, you must also request that the Israelis change their policies."

"We are saying 'yes' to peace. We are saying 'yes' to building relations with the international community. We are saying 'yes' to anything we feel will be in the interest of the Palestinian people," Nazzal said.

Nazzal and other Hamas officials described their visit to Russia, their first official contact with a major

power, as a "breakthrough" they hoped would help their group -- listed as a "terrorist organisation" by Israel, the United States and Europe -- establish legitimacy on the world stage.

"This visit will encourage many countries to contact Hamas and invite Hamas to their countries," Nazzal said.

The Hamas visit to Russia was made at the invitation of President Vladimir Putin, who caught the other three members of the international Middle East "quartet" of mediators -- the United States, the European Union and the United Nations -- by surprise with the move.

Zawahiri urges Hamas to keep fighting Israel

AFP, Dubai

al-Qaeda deputy leader Ayman al-Zawahiri has urged the radical Islamist movement Hamas to fight on and not to accept agreements between the Palestinian Authority and Israel.

Speaking in video footage broadcast Saturday on the Arabic television channel Al-Jazeera, Zawahiri described the agreements as "surrender accords" and called on Hamas, victors in the January 25 Palestinian election, "to continue the armed struggle."

Zawahiri also called on Muslims to boycott Western countries that have "insulted the Prophet Mohammed" by printing cartoons depicting him.

Osama bin Laden's lieutenant and chief ideologue of the al-Qaeda terror network, the Egyptian Zawahiri mentioned specifically the 1993 Oslo peace accords between Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organisation, as well as the current international "roadmap" peace plan.

"The surrender accords signed by the lay members of the Palestinian Authority must not be recognised. Your only alternative is to pursue the armed struggle until the liberation of Palestine and the building of an Islamic state," he told Hamas.

Zawahiri called on the Islamist movement not to take up their seats in the parliament, the Palestinian Legislative Council, "with lay people who have sold out Palestine."

Gandhi memorial 'purified' after dog visit

AP, New Delhi

Hindu priests, who take care of the Gandhi memorial, have conducted a purification ceremony at the shrine so as to cleanse it after it was scoured by Bush's sniffer-dogs.

The priests fetched water from the Ganges for the ceremony.

Bush had visited the memorial on Thursday during his three-day visit to India. The site, where Gandhi was cremated, is considered sacred and it is mandatory for all visitors to remove their shoes before entering the premises.

The dogs, flown in from the US, were part of the intense security for the president, but the Hindu priests believed they tainted the site.

Letting dogs into the memorial also drew sharp protests from Hindu politicians and Gandhi's great grandson Tushar Gandhi, who called the incident a "national shame."