

Human rights slain on US global battlefield: Amnesty

AFP, London

Amnesty International yesterday launched a scathing attack on the United States accusing it of trampling on human rights, and using the world as "a giant battlefield" in its "war on terror."

The war in Iraq and the politics of fear being spread by the administration of US President George W. Bush around the globe were fuelling deep international divisions, the human rights group charged.

Washington was also guilty of "breathtakingly shameless" double speak, claiming to be promoting human rights while at the same time brazenly flouting international law, the London-based group charged in its 2007 annual report.

"Nothing more aptly portrayed the globalization of human rights violations than the US-led 'war on terror' and its programme of 'extraordinary renditions' which implicated governments in countries as

far apart as Italy and Pakistan, Germany and Kenya," said the group's secretary general Irene Khan.

Last year, evidence revealed how the US administration treated the world as one giant battlefield for its 'war on terror', kidnapping, arresting, arbitrarily detaining, torturing and transferring suspects from one secret prison to another across the world with impunity," she added.

Hundreds of people have now been transferred by the US and its allies through these secret renditions to countries such as Syria, Jordan and Egypt.

Yet Washington remains deaf to pleas to shut down its remote military prison in Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, where many of these detainees have ended up, held without charge or trial, virtually incommunicado.

The "misguided military adventure in Iraq has taken a heavy toll on human rights and humanitarian



Irene Khan

law," Khan said in Amnesty's hard-hitting report.

If Iraq was to escape from the cycle of violence and bloodshed and avoid its "apocalyptic prognosis", the Iraqi government and the US-led coalition had to set clear human rights benchmarks such as disarming the militia and reforming the police.

The international community, led by the US, had also squandered the opportunity to build an effective

state based on human rights and the rule of law in Afghanistan, the group said.

And Amnesty berated the US administration for its "continued failure to hold senior government officials accountable for torture and other ill-treatment of 'war on terror' detainees despite evidence that abuses had been systematic."

The US "is unrepentant about the global web of abuse it has spun in the name of counter-terrorism," Khan wrote.

"It is oblivious to the distress of thousands of detainees and their families, the damage to the rule of international law and human rights and the destruction of its own moral authority, which has plummeted to an all-time low."

Bush had "invoked the fear of terrorism" to boost his powers without any oversight by Congress, she said, warning how too many leaders were "trumpeting an ever-widening range of fears."

Four killed in Bangkok shooting spree

AFP, Bangkok

Four people were killed yesterday and six injured when a Thai gunman went on a shooting spree in a market on the outskirts of Bangkok, police said.

The unidentified man was apparently enraged when police seized his motorcycle, and stalked through a market in Pathumthani province, north of Bangkok, shooting dead a villager, a security guard and a police officer.

After a two-hour pursuit, police shot and killed the gunman, who was wielding an AK-47 and wore night vision goggles, Police Lieutenant Colonel Permkiat Suriyawong told AFP.

"The gunman shot indiscriminately," Permkiat said. "Police successfully executed him."

Two police and four civilians were injured in the shooting at the market, and remain in a critical condition in hospital.

Seven killed in Thailand's restive south

AFP, Yala

Seven people including two teenagers have been killed in the Thai south, police said yesterday, while 11 others were injured in a spate of bombings by suspected separatist rebels.

Police yesterday found four bullet-riddled bodies in a house on a rubber plantation in Yala, one of three Muslim-majority southern provinces.

The victims, all Muslims, were a 56-year-old rubber tapper and his 21-year-old daughter, and two brothers aged 15 and 18, police said, adding they were unsure if the brothers were related to the father and daughter.

Later yesterday, a roadside bomb slightly injured four policemen who were returning from the site of the multiple killings.

Police said the body of a suspected militant was also found near the blast site, his head apparently blown off.

6 killed, dozens injured in Ankara bombing

AFP, Ankara

A powerful bomb ripped through a commercial district in the Turkish capital during evening rush hour Tuesday, killing six people, including one Pakistani national, and injuring more than 70.

Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan described the blast as a "treacherous and brutal terrorist attack," but brushed aside a question on whether initial findings pointed to any particular group.

Police would issue a statement in due course, Erdogan said, as he surveyed the carnage around the bombsite in the heart of the busy downtown district of Ulus.

He said there had been no initial arrests in connection with the bomb, which a policeman at the scene told AFP had been "placed at the bus stops" on busy Anafartalar Avenue, packed with people during the evening rush hour.

Sections of a four-storey shopping mall's entrance had collapsed from the force of the blast, timed at 6:45 pm (1545 GMT) by the Anatolia news agency, and the windows of nearby buildings were shattered.

Grueling footage broadcast on the CNN-Turk channel showed police removing mutilated body parts and a bloodied man being carried into an ambulance.

Shopkeeper Mehmet Yilmaz told Anatolia he saw flames and dark smoke when he rushed out of his shop after the explosion. He said he helped a man covered in flames and saw mutilated limbs on the street.

The NTV news channel said police believed the bomb was made of A-4 plastic explosive, widely used by Kurdish rebels fighting a 22-year insurgency against the Ankara government.

"Unfortunately, four of our citizens and one Pakistani national

were killed," Erdogan told journalists at the scene of the blast.

Shortly afterwards, Anatolia reported that a sixth person had died of his injuries in hospital.

Erdogan said more than 60 people, four of them Pakistanis, were hurt in the explosion, while Anatolia put the number of injured at 76 and described seven of them as being in serious condition.

The news agency quoted a Pakistani military attaché as saying eight of his countrymen were injured in the blast, all members of a delegation attending a three-day international defence industry fair that opened on Tuesday morning.

The explosion occurred minutes before the start of an official reception a few hundred yards away at Ankara's Museum of Anatolian Civilizations which was to be attended by delegations from 48 countries coming for the fair.

Eliminate cluster bombs, urge 6 Nobel laureates

AFP, Lima

Betty Williams and Mairead Corrigan Maguire (Ireland-1976).

An international conference opening Wednesday will seek to ban the weapons.

"We applaud bold initiatives that tackle such issues -- and lend our full support to this new process determined to eliminate cluster munitions," Williams said.

Williams, whose work to ban landmines garnered the 1997 Nobel Peace Prize, represents the Cluster Munition Coalition, which urged South America to follow Central America, which has already banned the weapons.

Representatives of more than 100 countries are expected in Lima for the conference that follows up on work begun February in Oslo, where 47 countries signed the Oslo Declaration seeking to ban the

weapons.

Before the conference ends on May 25, plans are to hammer out an international treaty to ban cluster munitions in 2008.

Taking part are countries that store or have used or produced cluster bombs, including Britain, France and Germany.

Many countries shattered by their effects such as Afghanistan, Cambodia, Lebanon and Laos also were to be on hand.

Argentina, Brazil and Chile currently manufacture cluster bombs in South America. While Argentina and Chile have sent representatives, Brazil has not.

China, Russia and the United States, the largest manufacturers of cluster bombs, oppose the ban. Israel most recently used the bombs less than a year ago.



PHOTO: AFP

Palestinian refugees cross from the southern entrance of their besieged refugee camp of Nahr al-Bared in north Lebanon to safety yesterday. By foot or in cars and pickup trucks, refugees were continuing to flee a battered camp as the guns fell silent after three days of ferocious fighting between Islamist militiamen and the Lebanese army.

US let democracy wither in Pakistan, experts say

AFP, Washington

The United States has let democracy wither in Pakistan, experts say, and is now hamstrung as political crisis convulses a nuclear-armed country that stands on the frontlines of the US "war on terror."

President Pervez Musharraf, Pakistan's military ruler whose support is critical to the US pursuit of the Taliban and al-Qaeda in Afghanistan, is enduring the most intense opposition since he seized power in a 1999 coup.

But analysts argue that having sunk billions of dollars into Musharraf's regime, US President George W. Bush's administration is an onlooker amid deadly unrest in Pakistan, which is also locked in nuclear-fueled tensions with India.

Musharraf's removal in March of Pakistan's independent-minded chief justice, Iftikhar Muhammad Chaudhry, has triggered weeks of protests. Violence in Karachi just over a week ago left at least 40 people dead.

The US State Department expressed its "deep concern" over Chaudhry's dismissal but has confined subsequent remarks to appealing for Pakistan's internal judicial process to be respected.

There is also anger in Pakistan over Musharraf's failure to quit his other post of army chief, and his refusal to allow exiled former prime

ministers Nawaz Sharif and Benazir Bhutto to return ahead of elections due by early 2008.

Speaking from his London home to The Times newspaper, Sharif said last week that Musharraf was a "gone man" and added that he felt "personally let down" by Bush, who is "alienating 160 million Pakistanis" in favor of Musharraf.

Both Sharif and Bhutto stand accused of rampant corruption and misrule, but Asia Foundation expert Hamid Sharif said they are still the leading lights of mainstream democracy as opposed to Islamic radicalism in Pakistan.

"US foreign policy, its security concerns, trump everything else in Pakistan, including democracy. I think that's extremely worrying if the US really wants to see a moderate, secular Pakistani emerge," he said.

The Pakistani public has "huge trust deficit" with the US government, he said, calling on Washington to broker a deal that allows for free and fair elections and safeguards for an independent judiciary.

"Official US statements are clearly intended to do no harm to Musharraf," commented Marvin Weinbaum, a former State Department intelligence analyst on Pakistan who is now at Washington's Middle East

Institute.

"The danger is that by doing him no harm, the US may well find its interests are damaged when and if he goes," he added, saying that Washington has no "plan B" for life without Musharraf.

"I don't think Pakistan can do without the US. It doesn't have other options. And the US can't do without Pakistan, given the consequences for Afghanistan, for nuclear command and control, for dangers with India."

At the same time, however, some in Washington are questioning the utility of US support for Musharraf, who became a pivotal ally after the September 11 attacks nearly six years ago by Osama bin Laden's Al-Qaeda network.

Since then, Pakistan has received roughly 10 billion dollars in US funding including for counter-terrorism operations along its border with Afghanistan, according to the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS).

Critics say that with bin Laden still at large and the Taliban now resurgent, the US largesse has been wasted.

The New York Times said Sunday the payments continue even though Musharraf had decided eight months ago to slash patrols through the lawless border area where Al-Qaeda and Taliban fighters are most active.

Pak CJ's witnesses and lawyers threatened

AFP, Islamabad

People linked to a legal case involving Pakistan's suspended chief justice are being threatened and intimidated, with one already shot dead and another detained, the judge's main lawyer said yesterday.

Aitzaz Ahsan, head counsel for Chief Justice Iftikhar Muhammad Chaudhry, also said lawyers and witnesses in the case were under "enormous pressure from the government," although he did not directly blame it for the incidents.

Military ruler President Pervez Musharraf removed the independent-minded Chaudhry on March 9, sparking violence which has left 40 people dead and the most serious political crisis of his eight-year rule.

"We are under enormous pressure from the government. One

witness has been murdered and another has been picked up," Ahsan told Pakistan's Supreme Court in Islamabad.

The Supreme Court is hearing an appeal by Chaudhry against his suspension and also against Musharraf's referral of the allegations to a panel of senior judges, called the Supreme Judicial Council.

Outside court, Ahsan gave further details of alleged intimidation.

"The lawyers are being threatened, my phones are being tapped, one witness has been killed, another has been lifted, I am getting threatening messages," he told AFP when asked to comment on his statements in court.

There was no immediate response from the government.

Supreme Court deputy registrar Syed Hamad Raza, who was brought to the court by Chaudhry in 2005 and served as his personal assistant, was killed by gunmen at dawn on May 10.

Police are still investigating the case but his brother and widow have claimed that he was assassinated because of his ties to the chief justice.

Ahsan later said the detained witness was the deputy inspector general of police in southern Sindh province, who was arrested last week and whose name was reportedly in the summary of charges against Chaudhry.

The policeman's wife filed a petition in the court on Tuesday saying that his detention was illegal and asking for him to be released.