

Tens of thousands held without trial in Iraq jails: Amnesty

AFP, Baghdad

Tens of thousands of detainees are being held without trial in Iraqi prisons and face violent and psychological abuse as well as other forms of mistreatment, Amnesty International said yesterday.

The London-based human rights watchdog estimates 30,000 people are held in Iraqi jails, noting several are known to have died in custody, while cataloguing physical and psychological abuses against others.

However, the deputy justice minister dismissed the report as "baseless" and a US military spokesman insisted Iraqi detention facilities met international standards.

"Iraq's security forces have been responsible for systematically violating detainees' rights and they have been permitted to do so with impunity," said Amnesty's Middle East and North Africa director Malcolm Smart.

"The Iraqi authorities must take the firm and decisive action now... to show that they have the will to uphold the human rights of all Iraqis."

Amnesty's 59-page report, entitled "New Order, Same Abuses: Unlawful detentions and torture in Iraq," lists several men it says were subjected to torture or who died in prison.

Among them was Riad Mohamed Saleh al-Oqaibi, arrested in September 2009 and held in a detention facility in Baghdad's heavily fortified Green Zone before being transferred to a secret detention facility in the capital.

"During interrogation, he said to have been beaten so hard on the chest that his ribs were broken and his liver damaged," the report said. "He died on 12 or 13 February as a result of internal bleeding."

According to the rights group, methods of torture used have included beatings with cables and hosepipes, breaking of limbs, piercing of the body with drills and psychological torture in the form of threats of rape.

It said security forces in the autonomous region of Kurdistan were also at fault, noting one case in which a detainee had been held for more than 10 years without charge or trial and was allegedly tortured by Kurdish security police.

Amnesty also criticised the United States for handing over several thousand detainees

to Iraqi custody "without any guarantees against torture or ill-treatment."

Iraq's fractured penal system means the justice, interior and defence ministries all run their own prisons, and reports of torture and mistreatment are not uncommon.

Human Rights Watch said in April that Iraqi men were raped, electrocuted and beaten in a "secret prison" in Baghdad, while MPs called for an independent inquiry into prison abuse in a parliamentary debate in June 2009.

Deputy Justice Minister Busho Ibrahim, however, dismissed the Amnesty report and allegations of torture in the justice ministry's prisons.

"All of the people arrested or held in our prisons are held according to arrest warrants and accusations against them," he told AFP. There is no torture at all, and this international report is not true and it is baseless."

Lieutenant Colonel Bob Owen, a US military spokesman, added that detention facilities were "inspected frequently and abide by the rule of law and international standards for detainee care and management."

"The US is not violating any international agreements in Iraq in respect to detainees," he said.

Iraq's human rights minister and a spokesman for the Kurdistan regional government were not immediately available to comment.

Baghdad assumed full responsibility for prisons in the country in July, with the United States responsible only for about 200 high-value detainees in Karkh Prison on the capital's outskirts.

At a ceremony on July 15 when Iraq took control of the last remaining US detention facility here, Justice Minister Dara Nureddine Dara said "the days of mistreatment and abuse of prisoners are gone."

"We will investigate and discharge anyone found to have committed a wrongful act," he said.

Amnesty noted while Iraq had announced inquiries into cases of maltreatment, torture and death in custody, the probe results had not been made public and "those responsible for abuses have not been brought to justice."

US diplomats have said in the past that Iraq's judicial system remains highly dependent on confessions from suspects at this point, rather than forensics or evidence.



Chinese babies accompanied by their parents take part in a baby swimming contest, which the organiser hopes to break the Guinness World Record for the most babies swimming together, at a stadium in Beijing Saturday. China's government contends that the one child policy has averted 400 million births since the strict policy implemented in 1979 and has vowed to enforce it until at least 2033, when the population is expected to peak at 1.5 billion people.

Taiwan to hike wage by 3.47 percent

AFP, Taipei

Taiwan said yesterday that it plans to increase its minimum wage by 3.47 percent, as part of its efforts to narrow a record income gap between rich and poor.

According to the plan, from January the minimum monthly wage for workers in Taiwan will be raised by 600 Taiwan dollars (18.84 US) to 17,880 Taiwan dollars from the present 17,280 Taiwan dollars.

The cabinet-level Council of Labour Affairs estimated that more than 1.5 million workers, including 187,000 foreign blue-collar workers, will benefit from the proposed wage hike -- the first since 2007.

"Inflation, domestic economic growth and the jobless rate were taken into consideration when we made the proposal," which is still subject to final approval by the cabinet, council chief Wang Ju-hsuan told reporters.

"It was difficult to please all parties but I believe the decision has taken care of the employees while not harming the industries," she said.

The move came after the government released figures last month showing that the most prosperous 20 percent of Taiwan's population reported average disposable incomes of 1.79 million Taiwan dollars last year, 6.34 times more than the income of the poorest 20 percent.

This was the highest level since 2001, said the Directorate General of Budget, Accounting and Statistics, which attributed the discrepancy to a global trend of widening income gaps between rich and poor.

Taiwan's economy grew a stronger-than-expected 12.53 percent year-on-year in the second 2010 quarter, confirming the export-dependent island's recovery from the global downturn. Full-year economic growth was projected at 8.24 percent.

S Korea to give N Korea flood aid as tensions ease

AFP, Seoul

South Korea yesterday announced aid to flood-stricken North Korea and a US envoy discussed the possible resumption of nuclear disarmament talks, amid signs of a thaw in cross-border relations.

But Seoul reiterated that Pyongyang was responsible for a deadly torpedo attack in March on a South Korean warship, an incident which sharply raised regional tensions.

And the envoy, Stephen Bosworth, stressed that Washington wants a "meaningful result" if six-nation nuclear negotiations are revived. There is "a lot of work to do" before the talks can resume, he said.

The North, which is set to hold a key meeting of its ruling communist party, has made a series of apparent peace overtures in recent weeks after months of fiery rhetoric.

It freed a US citizen jailed for an illegal border crossing after former president Jimmy Carter visited Pyongyang, and returned the crew of a South Korean boat accused of poaching on its fishing grounds.

The North also accepted offers of flood aid and called for the restarting of a reunion programme for families separated since the 1950-1953 war on the peninsula.

The two sides will hold working-level talks Friday about a possible resumption of the programme, which has been on hold for a year, Seoul's unification ministry said.

About 80,000 elderly South Koreans are desperate for a brief meeting with family in the North but up to 4,000 of them die each year before getting the chance.

The South's Red Cross said it would send aid worth 10 billion won (8.3 million dollars), including 5,000 tons of rice, 10,000 tons of cement and three million packs of instant noodles.

Its chief Yoo Chong-Ha said the rice would go to the town of Sinuiju on the China border, which was swamped last month by an overflowing river.

He said the aid would be mainly financed by

the Seoul government.

The North has announced it will hold a rare party conference this month which is expected to pave the way for an eventual leadership succession from Kim Jong-Il to his youngest son Jong-Un.

South Korean cable TV channel YTN said the meeting was delayed after Kim's health worsened following his five-day trip to China late last month.

It said the meeting would likely be held soon since Kim's health was not bad enough to merit a cancellation.

Cross-border relations have been icy since Seoul accused Pyongyang of the warship attack which killed 46 people. The North vehemently denies the charge.

The South's defence ministry yesterday released a full 313-page report into the sinking. It reaffirmed conclusions reached earlier by international investigators -- that an attack by a North Korean submarine sank the corvette in one of the peninsula's deadliest incidents for decades.

China has refused publicly to accept that its ally the North was responsible, and has instead been pushing to revive the six-party talks to ease tensions.

The United States is also involved in the forum along with the two Koreas, Japan and Russia. The North quit the talks in April last year and staged an atomic weapons test -- its second -- a month later.

The US wants a sign that the North is serious about disarmament before the nuclear dialogue restarts.

Bosworth, the US special envoy on North Korea, said after talks with South Korean officials that his country "is not interested in talking just for the sake of talking with the North Koreans."

"We want negotiations that produce a meaningful result, so we will be looking for an indication that North Korea shares that desire and determination," the envoy, who will go on to Japan and China, told reporters.

UN, Iran clash over barred nuke inspectors

AFP, Vienna

UN atomic watchdog chief Yukiya Amano expressed "great regret" yesterday at Iran's decision to bar key inspectors from the country, saying it hampered the agency's ability to investigate.

"I learned with great regret about Iran's decision to object to the designation of two inspectors who recently conducted inspections in Iran," Amano told the 35-member board of the International Atomic Energy Agency.

"Iran's repeated objection to the designation of inspectors with experience in Iran's nuclear fuel cycle and facilities hampers the inspection process," he said, according to a copy of his speech.

Amano made his comments in the opening address to the closed-door meeting of the board of governors being held this week.

In a restricted report circulated to board members last week, Amano had already complained about Tehran's so-called "de-designation" of inspectors, particularly in the recent cases of two experienced inspectors who had their permits revoked after Iran alleged they had made "false" reports.

But Amano stood by his staff yesterday.

"I express my full confidence in the professionalism and impartiality of the inspectors concerned," he said. "Both are very knowledgeable about the nuclear fuel cycle and have long experience in Iran."

It was not the first time that Iran has objected to the nomination of key inspectors, Amano pointed out.

China an 'important engine' for world economic recovery: Wen Jiabao

AFP, Tianjin

China's economy is in "good shape" and has helped power the world's recovery from the devastating financial crisis that erupted two years ago, Premier Wen Jiabao said yesterday.

Wen, speaking at the start of the World Economic Forum three-day "Summer Davos" in the northern port city of Tianjin, also pledged to ensure an open and fair environment for foreign businesses operating in the Asian powerhouse.

"China's economic growth has provided major development opportunities for the multinationals and created huge demand for major economies and neighbouring countries," Wen said.

"It has become an important engine for the world economic recovery," the premier said, praising his country's massive stimulus package as "timely, fruitful, effective and suited to China's realities".

"China's economy is now in good shape, featuring fast growth, gradual structural improvement, rising employment and basic price stability," he said.

China's economy slowed in the second quarter, growing 10.3 percent compared with a blistering 11.9 percent in the first three months,

after Beijing introduced a slew of measures designed to avoid overheating.

Japanese government data issued last month showed that its second quarter GDP on a nominal basis came in at 1.288 trillion dollars, below China's 1.336 trillion dollars, although Japan remained stronger over the first half.

Wen reiterated that Beijing was "committed to creating an open and fair environment for foreign-invested enterprises", while noting that foreign firms had "reaped good returns" in China.

Surveys by the American and European chambers of commerce in recent months have shown that overseas companies are increasingly unhappy with the way they are treated in China.

The European Union chamber said early this month that uneven enforcement of laws and unfair restrictions on foreign investment were deterring overseas companies from expanding their operations in the Asian country.

Beijing last month urged officials to implement policies aimed at encouraging foreign investment, in an apparent response to the criticism by foreign governments and firms over perceived unfair policies.

Kosovo town hit by violent riots

ALJAZEERA ONLINE

Ethnic Serbs and Albanians have clashed in Kosovo's divided town of Mitrovica, wounding three international peacekeepers and six locals, officials have said.

The clashes began on Sunday after Turkey beat Serbia 83-82 in a World Basketball Championship match on the previous night in the Turkish city of Istanbul, keeping them from reaching Sunday's final.

"KFOR [Nato's peacekeeping mission in Kosovo] strongly condemns the violent clashes in Mitrovica,"

Major General Erhard Buhler, who leads the mission, said in a statement on Sunday.

"KFOR will not tolerate any violence in Kosovo and I ask the population in Kosovo to help that the troublemakers can be arrested."

Hundreds of people from the ethnic Albanian-dominated southern part of Mitrovica gathered to celebrate Turkey's victory on the Ibar river which separates the two communities.

Serbs from the north and Albanians from the south started hitting each other with stones, prompting Kosovo police and European Union security forces to close the bridge and separate the two groups.

Protesters hurling Molotov cocktails were dispersed by police using tear gas.

Sensitive touch for 'robot skin'

BBC ONLINE

"Artificial skin" that could bring a sensitive touch to robots and prosthetic limbs, has been shown off.

The materials, which can sense pressure as sensitively and quickly as human skin, have been outlined by two groups reporting in Nature Materials.

The sensors are arrays of small pressure sensors that convert tiny changes in pressure into electrical signals.

The arrays are built into or under flexible rubber sheets that could be stretched into a variety of shapes.

The materials could be used to sheath artificial limbs or to create robots that can pick up and hold fragile objects. They could also be used to improve tools for minimally-invasive surgery.

BOUNCEBACK

In one approach, Ali Javey at the University of California, Berkeley, and his colleagues built up layers of criss-crossed nanometre-scale wires topped with a thin rubber sheet.

Artificial skin sensors The "skins" match human skin's ability to sense tiny pressure changes quickly

Together, the stack acts as what is known as a thin-film transistor, or TFT, with a pressure-sensitive layer on top.

The amount of electrical current running through the device is dependent upon how much pressure is exerted on the rubber sheet; more pressure allows more current to flow.

The team demonstrated the flexibility of their TFT stacks by bending them to a radius smaller than that of a pencil without changing the skin's performance.

"Javey's work is a nice demonstration of their capability in making a large array of nanowire TFTs," said Zhenan Bao of Stanford University, whose group demonstrated the second approach.

The heart of Professor Bao's device is micro-structured rubber sheet in the middle of the TFT - effectively re-creating the func-



The arrays of pressure sensors are of unprecedented sensitivity

tionality of the Berkeley group's skins with less layers.

"Instead of laminating a pressure-sensitive resistor array on top of a nanowire TFT array, we made our transistors to be pressure sensitive," Professor Bao explained to BBC News.

"Our microstructured rubber can bounce back to its original shape much faster and enable higher sensitivity," she added.



An investigator takes photos of the mannequins as they reconstruct the positions of Hong Kong tourist victims who were killed in the botched bus hostage rescue operation on August 23, at the Department of Justice in Manila yesterday.