



The "Surge" of Iraqi Prisoners

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May 7, 2008

Amid all the talk about the US military "surge" in Iraq, little has been said about the accompanying "surge" of Iraqi prisoners, whose numbers rose to nearly 51,000 at the end of 2007. Four years after the Abu Ghraib scandal, occupation forces are holding far more Iraqis than ever before and thousands more languish in horrendous Iraqi-run prisons.

The Detention Camps

Detainees are held by the US command in two main locations -- Camp Bucca, a 100-acre prison camp near Um Qasr and Camp Cropper, inside a massive U.S. base complex near the Baghdad airport. The number of Iraqis held in these facilities has steadily risen since the early days of the occupation. In 2007, the inmate count rose 70% -- from 14,500 to 24,700. Camp Bucca, with about 20,000 inmates, is perhaps the world's largest extrajudicial internment camp. The facility is organized into "compounds" of 800 detainees each, surrounded by fences and watch towers. Most detainees live in large communal tents, subject to collapse in the area's frequent sandstorms. Water has at times been in short supply, while temperatures in the desert conditions can be scorching hot in the day and bone-chilling at night.

In October 2007, the US Army Corps of Engineers awarded a contract to expand Camp Bucca's capacity from 20,000 to 30,000. While easing notorious crowding, the contract suggests Washington is preparing for even more detentions in the future. Camp Cropper consists of more traditional cellblock buildings. Among its roughly 4,000 inmates are hundreds of juveniles. Cropper is a site of ongoing interrogation and it holds many long-term detainees who complain that they never see the light of day. Though recently expanded, the facility suffers from overcrowding, poor medical attention and miserable conditions.

Indefinite Detention

US forces are holding nearly all of these persons indefinitely, without an arrest warrant, without charge, and with no opportunity for those held to defend themselves in a trial. While the United States has put in place a formal review procedure that supposedly evaluates all detainees for release on a regular basis, detainees cannot attend these reviews, cannot confront evidence against them, and cannot be represented properly by an attorney. Families are only irregularly notified of the detentions, and visits are rarely possible.

These conditions are in direct violation of international human rights law, though Washington claims that such legal constraints do not apply, because the United States considers its forces to be engaged in an "international armed conflict." The human rights community, however, firmly disagrees arguing that the conflict is not international in the traditional legal sense. Furthermore, international human rights law applies at all times, in war as well as in peace.

The detention facilities are closed to human rights monitors like Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, or the International Federation of Human Rights. Even the United Nations Assistance Mission in Iraq, mandated by the Security Council to provide human rights reporting, is denied access by the U.S. command. Lack of such monitors greatly increases the likelihood that detainees will suffer from abuse and bad conditions, as human rights organizations have often pointed out. Prisoners at Bucca have rioted to protest maltreatment, poor conditions and religious insults by guards. Most troubling, the military regularly confirms deaths of detainees in the facility, suggesting that excessive force is commonly used.

Iraqi Government Prisons

In addition to the U.S. detainees, the Government of Iraq is holding over 26,000 prisoners. Some of those held in Iraqi facilities have been convicted of crimes, but many others are being held in unlimited detention without charge. Some have even been tried in court and, even having been found innocent, continue to be held indefinitely. Many prisoners have been convicted in trials that do not measure up to minimal standards of legality. As the UN concludes in a recent report, "substantial improvement is required to prevent gross miscarriage of justice."

Recent UN reports have also said that the facilities are "severely overcrowded" and that they have "dire sanitation and hygiene conditions." Further, there were said to be "continuing reports of widespread and routine torture and ill-treatment of detainees." Several women inmates, interviewed by UN researchers, reported being raped and sexually abused while held in police custody. The US command, with its enormous influence over the Iraqi detention system, has a large responsibility for these conditions.

Time to Speak Out

On February 13, 2008 the Iraqi Parliament passed an Amnesty Law that could apply to many thousands of detainees. The US command has also recently announced a program of detainee releases. But despite this public relations offense, detainee numbers have declined only slightly since a peak in November 2007. Given the history of previous announcements of detainee releases, little change is anticipated.

If a government like Iran or Syria held US citizens in detention without charge or trial, imagine the worldwide clamor for justice! It is time for the public in the United States and around the world to face the sordid reality of post-surge Iraq and do something about it -- beginning with the release of all those illegally held in US and Iraqi prisons. Detention facilities should immediately be opened to national and international observers. The whole abusive system must be thoroughly overhauled or closed down. U.S. military and civilian leaders are not the only ones complicit in the abuse and lack of due process of Iraqi detainees. All who stay silent in the face of the Iraq gulag allow it to continue.

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