

Human Rights Watch

Torture, Former Combatants, Political Prisoners, Terror Suspects, & Terrorists

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The Iraqi government must move quickly to prosecute all Ministry of Interior personnel responsible for death squad killings in Baghdad and elsewhere, Human Rights Watch said today.

Evidence suggests that Iraqi security forces are involved in these horrific crimes, and thus far the government has not held them accountable, said Sarah Leah Whitson, director of Human Rights Watch's Middle East division. The Iraqi government must stop giving protection to security forces responsible for abduction, torture and murder.

Every month, hundreds of people are abducted, tortured and killed by what many believe are death squads that include security forces. To terrorize the population, the killers often dump the mutilated corpses in public areas.

Human Rights Watch welcomed the recent suspension from duties of the 8th Iraqi Police Unit pending an investigation into their complicity in abductions and killings. The US military has claimed that the unit was responsible for the October 1 kidnapping of 26 Sunni food factory workers in southwest Baghdad, 10 of whom were later found dead. The news agency Inter Press Service reported that the unit used Ministry of Interior vehicles and, according to witnesses, some wore black death squad uniforms.

The investigation into the 8th Iraqi Police Unit is only a first step, said Whitson. It is vital that the government get the evidence to bring criminal prosecutions against those responsible, whatever their rank.

The Ministry of Interior is responsible for the country's security forces, some of which have close ties to the two principal Shi'a militias the Mahdi Army and the Badr Forces. These security forces are believed to be responsible for numerous sectarian killings, operating in some cases as death squads in Baghdad and other provinces. It is not clear to what extent the ministry controls these security forces or whether they are under the effective control of the militias.

Human Rights Watch has examined scores of bodies at the Medico-Legal Institute in Baghdad over the past two years that appear to have been victims of execution-style killings, often preceded by torture. Police bring bodies of people killed in violent attacks to the institute in cases requiring criminal investigation. Victims' family members sometimes have evidence, such as eyewitness accounts of a victim's arrest, that Ministry of Interior security forces were involved in the killing. In addition, statements by ministry officials and information from international police advisers also point to direct participation or complicity of government security forces in these killings.

Human Rights Watch said that the failure of the Iraqi government to properly vet police recruits, establish monitoring and accountability mechanisms, and address reports of police abuses have contributed to the crimes of the security forces.

By the fall of 2004, a review of the country's police forces by international advisers and the interior ministry deemed between 20,000 and 30,000 police personnel unsuitable for the job, but did not remove them from service. The review, which examined police recruitment practices under the Coalition Provisional Authority, showed that some ministry personnel had no basic policing skills and in some cases were completely illiterate.

While Iraqi officials and international advisers made efforts to tackle wide-scale corruption among security and police forces, they gave low priority to establishing monitoring mechanisms and holding accountable those suspected of having abused detainees in their custody.

Both Iraqi officials and their international advisers are responsible for the lack of effective mechanisms to monitor the post-training conduct of law enforcement personnel, said Whitson.

Since the official end of the US military occupation in June 2004, successive Iraqi governments have failed to adequately address continuing human rights abuses perpetrated by the security forces, including arbitrary arrest, prolonged detention without due process, and wide-spread torture. As a result, a climate of impunity has prevailed.

In January 2005, [Human Rights Watch reported on the routine and systematic abuse of detainees in the custody of the Ministry of Interior](#). Human Rights Watch raised these issues of abuse repeatedly with the relevant governments over the past two years, but with little effect. Since then, Multinational Force and Iraqi investigations have uncovered horrific abuse of detainees in at least two major interior ministry facilities. While the government ordered investigations in these instances, it has never publicly revealed its findings. Worse, it continues to obstruct the pursuit of criminal proceedings against alleged perpetrators.

The government has consistently ignored abuses by its security forces in hopes that they will bring the violence rampant in Iraq under control, said Whitson. Today, we know that these forces are a primary source of the violent crime in the country.

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