

Civilian Deaths Soar to Record Levels in Iraq

US Sponsored "Sectarian Violence"

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Civilian Deaths Soar to Record High in Iraq

By Peter Beaumont

The Guardian UK

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UN report warns of grave sectarian crisis in country. Doubts on PM's ability to avoid slide to civil war.

Nearly 7,000 civilians were killed in Iraq in the past two months, according to a UN report just released – a record high that is far greater than initial estimates had suggested. As American generals in Baghdad warned that the violence could worsen in the run up to Ramadan next Monday, the UN spoke of a “grave sectarian crisis” gripping the country.

With known Iraqi deaths running at more than 100 a day because of sectarian murders, al-Qaida and nationalist insurgent attacks, and fatalities inflicted by the multinational forces, the UN said its total was likely to be “on the low side” because of the difficulties of collecting accurate figures. In particular, it said that no deaths were reported from the violent region covering Ramadi and Falluja.

The report from the UN assistance mission in Iraq’s human rights office reported evidence of torture, unlawful detentions, the growth of sectarian militias and death squads, and a rise in “honour killings” of women. The increasing incidence of discovery of the bodies of women and teenage girls, shot in the chest rather than in the head, has been attributed to the establishment by both extremist Sunnis and Shias of secretive sharia committees, which locals say carry out killings.

In a separate development, Manfred Nowak, the UN’s special investigator, said torture was “totally out of hand” and might even be worse now than under Saddam Hussein. “You have terrorist groups, you have the military, you have police, you have these militias. There are so many people who are abducted, seriously tortured and finally killed,” he told reporters at the UN’s Geneva headquarters.

The US military had initially claimed a dramatic drop in the Iraqi death toll for August, but the estimate was revised sharply upwards after it revealed that it had inexplicably left out figures for people killed by bombs, mortars, rockets and other mass attacks.

The latest fatality figures have been disclosed amid emerging criticism from Iraqi and US officials – quoted anonymously in the New York Times – of the prime minister Nouri al-Maliki’s ability to prevent the country sliding into civil war.

The violence again has risen most sharply in Baghdad, despite a massive joint Iraqi government and US operation to “clear” no-go areas of fighters. The report raises serious new questions about the ability of US and Iraqi forces to bring peace to Baghdad, where the bulk of the violent deaths occur.

Critically, the report states that the country’s government, set up in 2006, is “facing a generalised breakdown of law and order which presents a serious challenge to the institutions of Iraq”.

According to the UN, which releases the figures every two months, violent civilian deaths in July reached an unprecedented high of 3,590 people, an average of more than 100 a day. The August toll was 3,009 people, the report said. In the previous period the UN had reported just under 6,000 deaths – 5,106 from Baghdad.

It added: “Bodies found at the Medico-legal Institute often bear signs of severe torture, including acid-induced injuries and burns caused by chemical substances, missing skin, broken bones (back, hands and legs), missing eyes, missing teeth and wounds caused by power drills or nails.”

On other issues, the report said that about 300,000 people had been displaced in Iraq since the bombing of a shrine in Samara in February.

The potential for even more violent instability came as two senior aides to the radical Shia cleric Muqtada al-Sadr, whose Mahdi Militia has been blamed for much of the sectarian killing, were detained early yesterday by US forces in the southern city of Najaf.

In the capital the violence continued. Insurgents killed six policemen and wounded two others when they attacked a police station in western Baghdad, while a car bomb killed two people and wounded eight in the capital’s mainly Shia Hurriya district. Gunmen also killed three policemen after attacking their patrol in the city.

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