

Iraqi Hopes Dim Through Worst Year of Occupation

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BAGHDAD, Dec. 22 (IPS) – Despite promises from Iraqi and U.S. leaders that 2006 would bring improvement, Iraqis have suffered through the worst year in living memory, facing violence, fragmentation and a disintegrated economy.*

A year back Iraqis were promised that 2006 would be the fresh beginning of a, prosperous, democratic and unified Iraq. Through an elected parliament and a unity government, they would find peace, and start rebuilding a country torn apart by the U.S.-backed UN sanctions and then the U.S.-led invasion and occupation.

But everyone agrees that the situation now is worse than ever. Leaders in Iraq disagree only to the extent they blame one another for the collapse in security that has led to worsened services and living conditions.

Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, along with many other Shia leaders in the Iraqi government, blames al-Qaeda and “Saddamists” for the degrading situation. Echoing statements by U.S. President George W. Bush, al-Maliki told reporters recently: “Those terrorists hate democracy because that makes them lose power, and all they are doing is killing Iraqi people in order to recapture what they lost after the liberation of Iraq.”

Whatever leaders say, people are simply looking back on a hellish year, and fearful of another to come.

“I wish I could flee to any third world country and work in garbage collection rather than stay here and live like a frightened rat,” Adel Mohammed Aziz, a teacher from Baghdad told IPS. “We are all living in fear for our lives; death chases us all around..”

The displacement of Iraqis from Iraq is currently the world’s fastest-growing refugee crisis, according to the Washington-based group Refugees International which works towards providing humanitarian assistance and protection for displaced people.

The United Nations estimates that at least 2.3 million Iraqis have fled the growing violence in their country. They estimate that 1.8 million Iraqis have fled to surrounding countries, while another half million have vacated their homes for safer areas within Iraq. An estimated 40,000 people are leaving Iraq every month for Syria alone, according to the UN.

Cases of sectarian killings had been reported before this year, with targeted victims such as former military people or scientists. But this year sectarian-based death squads became a threat to all Iraqis, particularly Sunni Muslims, whose beliefs differ in ways from those of Shia Muslims. The body count has increased to a minimum of 100 a day, with most killed after monstrous torture.

"We cannot go to work, cannot go to pray in our mosques, and cannot send our children to schools," young mother Um Rheem from the Shaab quarter in Baghdad told IPS. "Many Sunni men have been killed by Shia death squads who have the full support of the government and Americans."

Such fears are common in many areas in Baghdad where the Sunnis are a minority. Other areas have other problems to live with.

"In areas where Sunnis are a majority, death squads attack in hundreds, taking advantage of curfews and using government police cars," Mahmood Abdulla from the predominantly Sunni Jihad quarter of Baghdad told IPS. "When we defend ourselves and our homes, they shell us with mortars and Kaytousha missiles. All of this takes place under the eyes of Americans and Iraqi government officials."

Shia Iraqis complain that they cannot go to Sunni dominated areas for work, and they cannot travel on the highway that leads to Syria and Jordan for fear of Sunni militias looking for revenge.

"Sunnis who lost family members would kill any Shia they find, and so we cannot go through their areas," Sa'arat Hassan, a vegetable merchant at the Jameela wholesale vegetable market in Baghdad told IPS.

According to a survey conducted by U.S. and Iraqi doctors for the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health, published in the British Lancet Medical Journal Oct. 11 this year, 654,965 Iraqis, or 2.5 percent of the entire population of the country, have died as a result of the U.S.-led invasion and occupation.

The survey found that "of post-invasion deaths, 601,027 were due to violence, the most common cause being gunfire."

The two months following publication of the survey have been Iraq's bloodiest to date.

The streets of Baghdad, once packed with cars and open businesses, look deserted most of the day now.

"We cannot open our shops for more than three to four hours a day," a carpet seller on the volatile Rasheed Street told IPS. "Many of my colleagues have been abducted for ransom or killed for sectarian reasons on the way to work. We expect death every minute."

The economic disaster is now an emergency. More than five million Iraqis are living below the poverty line, close to half of them in desperate conditions, according to a government study.

Iraqi officials and NGOs estimate the unemployment rate at more than 60 percent.

The cost of basic necessities soared during 2006, compounding the unemployment crisis. A report by Iraq's central office for statistics cited by the NGO Coordination Committee for Iraq (NCCI) suggests 70 percent inflation from July 2005 to July 2006.

The World Food Programme said in a report 'Food Security and Vulnerability in Iraq' last May that if the situation in Iraq was not controlled, 8.3 million more people (31 percent of the

population) would be rendered “food insecure” if they were not provided their monthly food rations. The rations were introduced under the Oil for Food Programme set up during the sanctions period in the 1990s.

Sectarian violence increased in Iraq after the bombing last February of an important Shia shrine located in Samarra, 60 km north of Baghdad. Shia death squads started appearing in massive numbers afterwards to carry out mass killings of Sunnis, and setting fire to their mosques. U.S. forces failed to provide protection for civilians on either side.

Meanwhile, armed Iraqi resistance to the U.S. occupation increased rapidly during 2006.

“Resistance fighters are Iraqis who are trying to put an end to this vicious occupation,” a senior political analyst at Baghdad University told IPS on condition of anonymity. “The Americans ignited sectarian war so that they reduce the action of national resistance, but the result came to be the opposite, and they are being hit harder and more often.”

The Sunni-dominated areas of Baghdad and western Iraq faced the worst U.S. military operations during 2006. The policy of siege, raids and large-scale detentions led to massive killing of civilians in cities like Haditha, Karma and Ramadi.

“Those Americans take us all for terrorists,” the manager of a human rights NGO in Ramadi to the west of Baghdad told IPS.

Speaking on condition that he and his organisation remain unnamed for fear of U.S. military reprisals, he added: “Their (U.S. military’s) crimes in Fallujah in 2004 were exposed, but they have committed a lot more crimes in 2006, and the world is silent about them. There is moaning in every house in the western and northern parts of the city (Ramadi) for losing members of their families.”

A poll conducted by the well-respected group World Public Opinion last month showed that 61 percent of Iraqis support attacks against U.S. forces. The poll found that 83 percent of Iraqis surveyed want the U.S. to withdraw completely next year.

U.S. casualties increased dramatically during the last three months of the year. This year saw at least 812 coalition soldier deaths in Iraq, with December looking to be one of the deadliest months for them, according to the website Iraq Coalition Casualties.

So far, at least 3,193 occupation troops have been killed in Iraq, 2,946 of them from the United States, according to the website. In addition, there have been 46,880 U.S. non-mortal casualties, including non-hostile and medical evacuations.

With no drastic changes imminent to the failed U.S. policy in Iraq, coupled with an Iraqi government that grows more impotent by the day, Iraqis have dim hopes of improvement in 2007.

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