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United Nations/Iraq: Security Council scared to face up to the human toll
of conflict in Iraq

Is the Security Council scared to face up to the human toll of conflict in Iraq? Irene Khan, Secretary General of Amnesty International, asked today.

"The humanitarian and human rights consequences of war must be given high priority by the Security Council. When war is contemplated against a country whose people have been suffering from severe violations by their government and more than a decade of sanctions, the need for such an assessment is even more important," said Ms Khan.

Amnesty International wrote last week to the President of the Security

Council to express concern that the likely impact on civilians of possible military action against Iraq has not received the attention it deserves and should be debated in an open session attended by all members of the United Nations. The organization today welcomed a move by South Africa to request such an open debate and added: "It is imperative that the President of the Security Council grant this request. A full, informed and open debate by the Security Council on the human rights and humanitarian consequences of any military action is urgently needed."

"Such human rights and humanitarian consequences must be carefully considered and balanced against the threat that Iraq is said to constitute to peace and security, if the Council is to properly fulfil its responsibilities under the Charter."

Amnesty International is deeply concerned that the current human rights and humanitarian situation in Iraq may rapidly deteriorate in case of military action. In particular, there is a risk of renewed human rights abuses by the Iraqi authorities, armed opposition groups, other parties involved in the military operations, and reprisals on ethnic or other grounds. There is therefore a clear need for close scrutiny of, and expert advice on, the human rights situation in Iraq.

"Regrettably, human rights concerns in this context have not been examined by the Security Council."

"Human rights monitors in Iraq would make a significant contribution to the protection of human rights not only in the current circumstances but also in any future scenario," Ms Khan said.

"Their mandate should cover human rights abuses in Iraqi territory by any party, and their reports should provide the United Nations system with authoritative information on the human rights situation and advice on remedial action."

Amnesty International understands that an assessment of the humanitarian risks of conflict in Iraq has already been carried out by the United Nations.

"United Nations Secretary-General, Kofi Annan plans to discuss the human impact of conflict in Iraq in an informal briefing of the Security Council, but this issue is far too serious to be held behind closed doors. A formal, open and transparent debate is needed," Irene Khan said.

Amnesty International has today mobilised its global membership to lobby the Security Council for a full United Nations debate.

Amnesty International has also called on the Security Council to ask the Secretary-General for an urgent public briefing on the impact of military action on civilians in Iraq and other countries.

In particular Amnesty International called on the Security Council to examine:

(1) The likely effects of military action on the overall human rights and humanitarian situation of the Iraqi population, already exposed to severe violations by their government and the effects of economic sanctions, especially in the event of serious disruption of the food distribution system and damage to essential infrastructure.

(2) The risk that military action would lead to a massive displacement crisis similar to that of 1991, with the need to ensure open borders and international solidarity in order to provide effective protection and assistance to refugees and internally displaced persons.

(3) The risk of grave violations of international humanitarian law, including direct attacks on civilians, the use of 'human shields', indiscriminate attacks and attacks on civilian objects. The impact of any possible use of chemical, biological and nuclear weapons, all of which are inherently indiscriminate, also needs to be assessed.

(4) Ways to ensure the immediate deployment of human rights monitors in line with resolution 57/232 passed by the General Assembly as recently as December 2002.

Amnesty International has welcomed and supported the initiatives taken by the Security Council in recent years stressing the importance of maximizing the protection of civilians in armed conflict situations and ensuring accountability for abuses, as reflected in resolutions 1265 (1999), 1296 (2000) and 1460 (2003).

"I call on the Council to apply the standards it has articulated to the situation in Iraq now." Ms Khan concluded.

Please sign our online petition to the President of the UN Security Council at <http://www.amnesty.org/go/iraq>

