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There are two priorities to implement in Iraq
Deploy human rights monitors and institute transparency

By Chibli Mallat
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Amnesty International's recent report on the killings of civilians by the British Army in Basra and Amara has added to the dramatic pictures of detainees being tortured by US jailers in Abu Ghraib.

The human rights violations in Iraq lead to three questions, the answers to which, at present, remain far short of the need to see justice done. First, how could such things take place without the world (including leaders of the coalition countries) being aware of them until much later? Second, what measures will be taken to punish those responsible? And third, how can a repetition of such violence be prevented, and what mechanisms are there to ensure they will not recur?

Each of these issues conjures up an array of legal and political demands, including pressing requests for the resignation of US Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld and the continuation of trials of the soldiers who took part in the mistreatment (one of whom was yesterday sentenced to a year in prison). It also raises another matter that must henceforth be addressed, namely the imposition of an agenda for the withdrawal of foreign forces from Iraq.

However, it is imperative today to look at the crisis from the perspective of protecting human rights by way of a large deployment of human rights monitors in Iraq. This request is not new. It originated in Security Council Resolution 688 of April 5, 1991, which demanded that the Iraqi government "cease the repression" of its population. Resolution 688 remained unimplemented because the UN special rapporteur on Iraq was consistently denied the means to deploy monitors on the ground.

In this deficiency lies part of the response to my earlier question, namely how could such a pattern of human rights violations occur without public knowledge? Internal control mechanisms over those wielding power - currently American and British soldiers - proved incapable of offering the required protection.

To date, Resolution 688 is still applicable to Iraq, where the occupying powers have replaced the government of former Iraqi President Saddam Hussein. As can be seen from the recent abuse, there remains a persistent need, both inside jails and on Iraqi streets, for the type of monitoring that will guarantee that human rights violators are subjected to denunciation and eventual punishment.

In this context, accountability would not be limited to the military chain of command; it would also be extended to cover the behavior of Iraqis and others at various levels.

Deployment of monitors must be effected until the human rights situation starts improving. Deployment can be immediate in the areas of greatest security - namely in Kurdistan and several districts of Baghdad.

The main role of the United Nations is now to provide Iraq with what the organization denied it for over a full decade. All other tasks, especially those of a political nature that are being foisted upon the Iraqis by the Bush administration and the UN envoy, Lakhdar Brahimi, are secondary, if not vain. Only Iraqis can decide on their future, but human rights are by nature a universal concern.

There is no need for a new UN resolution, and Security Council Resolution 1483 (2002) expressly mentions "the protection of human rights" and calls for the establishment of "an international police corps." This was also an Amnesty International recommendation in its report on Basra and Amara. Only the deployment of such a force, or its equivalent in the more precise concept of human rights monitors, can offer an answer to the continuing Iraqi crisis.

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