

The Christian Science Monitor

To Arabs, photos confirm brutal US

Amnesty International says it has uncovered a 'pattern of torture.' US officials say there's no systematic abuse.

By **Nicholas Blanford** | Correspondent of The Christian Science Monitor

BEIRUT, LEBANON - Nour Dandash stares with pursed lips at the photograph of naked and hooded Iraqi detainees piled in a heap before two laughing American soldiers.

"It's sick, horrible, disgusting," says the 17-year-old Lebanese student.

"The Americans say they went into Iraq to stop these abuses. But now they're doing exactly the same thing as Saddam Hussein."

That is a typical reaction here to the graphic picture and several others like it taken by American soldiers guarding Iraqi detainees at the Abu Ghraib prison on the outskirts of Baghdad.

But to some extent the impact of the pictures has been blunted, as many Arabs say they expect no less from the United States given the widely held view that it is running a brutal and oppressive occupation in Iraq.

"Will the pictures make a difference in the Arab world? Probably not," says Michael Young, a Lebanese political analyst. "It simply confirms what people already think about the Americans. But it will be embarrassing for the Americans in Iraq, and that's where it's going to count."

Since they were released last week, the pictures have aired continuously on Arabic TV and been splashed on the front pages of newspapers, drawing reactions of outrage and condemnation.

Sunni Muslim leaders in Iraq have said that the abuse constituted "war crimes" while Amr Musa, the secretary-general of the Arab League, has expressed "shock and disgust" at the "shameful images."

But the Americans are not the only members of the coalition to face accusations of human rights abuses. On Saturday, the British Daily Mirror published photos it said were of British soldiers torturing an Iraqi prisoner in the back of an Army truck. The paper's front page carried a picture of a British soldier apparently urinating on the hooded and manacled detainee. The prisoner was badly beaten before being thrown out the back of the moving truck, the Mirror said.

"People will be extremely angry. sexual abuse is the worst thing in that part of the world," said Abdel Bari Atwan, editor of the London-based Al-Quds newspaper. "I think this is the end of the story, the straw that broke the camel's back, for America," he added. "The British job will be extremely difficult because we are associated with this torture and abuse, the closest ally of a country which tortures prisoners."

London-based human rights watchdog Amnesty International said it had

uncovered a "pattern of torture" of Iraqi prisoners and demanded a full independent investigation into the claims.

Among the Abu Ghraib photographs was one of two naked men forced to simulate a sex act. Another portrayed a row of naked and hooded prisoners standing in a line. A grinning female American soldier with a cigarette dangling out of her mouth points at their genitals, which had been discreetly blurred by television stations. Arabs find public nudity especially distasteful, let alone naked men being humiliated by foreign women.

"It's unbelievable. These are the same old practices of Saddam," says Sateh Nouredine, a columnist with Lebanon's As-Safir newspaper.

The photos could not have come at a worse time for the Bush administration and British Prime Minister Tony Blair's government, both facing mounting criticism for their Iraqi policies.

An internal Army report found that Iraqi detainees were subjected to "sadistic, blatant and wanton criminal abuses" at the Abu Ghraib prison near Baghdad, according to The New Yorker magazine, which said it obtained a copy.

In the US, condemnation was swift and strong against the actions detailed in the photos. The chief of the US Army Reserve, Lt. Gen. James Helmly, said they "go against the grain of everything America's Army stands for," and ordered a study of the training reservists receive in how to treat prisoners. President Bush also expressed his revulsion, saying Friday that "I share a deep disgust that those prisoners were treated the way they were treated."

Gen. Richard Myers, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, said Sunday the actions of "a handful" had tarred all US forces. "There is no evidence of systematic abuse" in the US detention operations in the region," he added. Six US soldiers face courts-martial.

Given the hostility toward the US in the region, analysts are divided on what the Bush administration can do to boost its image among Arabs and Muslims.

Mr. Nouredine says he doubts that Washington will bother to improve its standing. "They act with such arrogance anyway that they don't seem to care what Arabs and Muslims think," he says.

For Chibli Mallat, a professor of international law at Beirut's St. Joseph University, the abuse illustrates why human rights monitors should be deployed throughout the country. "You need an independent watchdog to monitor such abuses," he says. "Otherwise, such horrors are bound to continue, be it Iraqis against Americans or, in this horrifying instance, Americans against Iraqis."

But there is no short-term solution for the US to repair the damage caused by more than 30 years of "bias and predatory and aggressive policies," says Rami Khouri, a Jordanian political analyst and executive editor of Lebanon's English-language Daily Star newspaper.

"They are not going to turn it around in three weeks," he says. "But they should start systematically addressing the reasons why people are so negative about them here and coming up with more consistently fair policies."

Public relations efforts such as Arabic-language TV and radio stations are a waste of funds and lack credibility, Mr. Khouri says. If you want to change opinions, change policies, he says.

"They [the US] have to be more even-handed in the Arab-Israeli issue, be less militaristic in addressing regimes they don't like, be more consistent in promoting democracy everywhere not only in a few places," Khouri says.

"They can turn their image around, but only if they turn their policies into more consistently fair and reasonable ones

The Daily Star

Rights group accuses UK of killing Iraqi civilians
British court approves victims' suit

By Cilina Nasser
Daily Star staff
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BEIRUT: Amnesty International urged the United Kingdom Tuesday to take action to secure the lives of Iraqi civilians, accusing British occupation forces in the war-torn country of killing non-combatants without justification, including an 8-year-old girl.

Meanwhile, a British court ruled that relatives of victims killed by UK troops in Iraq could bring their case against the government. British officials are under increasing domestic pressure over their policy in Iraq after the scandal of mistreatment of Iraqi prisoners erupted.

"The way things are going in Iraq it seems to me it is in everyone's interest that this point should be decided as soon as possible," said Judge Andrew Collins, who ruled the European Convention on Human Rights was applicable to the case of the 12 families of the victims.

Amnesty International appealed to UK authorities to ensure that all individuals exercising law enforcement functions in Iraq uphold civilians' right to life on the grounds of the UN Basic Principles on the Use of Force and Firearms, and principles of humanitarian law.

"In several cases documented by Amnesty International, UK soldiers opened fire and killed Iraqi civilians in circumstances where there was apparently no imminent threat of death or serious injury to themselves or others," said the human rights watchdog in a 31-page report.

The report, titled "Iraq: Killings of Civilians in Basra and Al-Amara," also criticized UK authorities for failing to conduct investigations into

the killings of civilians, citing the case of the death of 8-year-old Hanan Saleh Matrud last August near Basra as an example.

Saleh stood with other children about 70 meters from a British armored vehicle that stopped near the entrance of the alley which leads to her home.

According to eyewitness Mizher Jaber Yassin, a soldier aimed and fired a shot which hit Hanan in her lower torso. She died the following day.

In a letter sent to the victim's family, dated Oct. 13, 2003, British military authorities claimed that the patrol of two Warrior vehicles of B Company of the First Battalion of the King's Regiment had been attacked by "heavy stone throwing from a number of mobs."

The letter stated the soldier was concerned for his safety and fired a "warning shot into the air" to disperse the stone throwers. "The patrol then noticed a crowd of people running toward them from an area of buildings with a girl who had been cut across the abdominal area."

According to Saleh's family, the military police photographed the area, interviewed witnesses the day after the killing, and photographed the girl's corpse at the hospital. However, information provided by the UK Minister of State for the Armed Forces on Jan. 19, 2004 indicated that no investigation was initiated by the UK military authorities following the killing.

In its report, Amnesty International called on UK authorities to ensure that investigations were conducted into all suspected cases of unlawful killings of civilians and to ensure that such investigations were "thorough, competent, impartial and independent, and seen to be so."

Investigations should also include an adequate autopsy, a collection and analysis of all physical and documentary evidence and statements from witnesses, said the rights group.

Ahmed al-Karaoud, director of the regional office for the Middle East and North Africa department of Amnesty International in Beirut, said that his group released a report shortly after the fall of the Iraqi regime, explaining what responsibilities the coalition countries held as occupying powers in Iraq.

One major responsibility highlighted in the report was the protection of the rights and lives of Iraqi civilians. "That was on April 24, 2003 ... that is a year ago," Karaoud said in a press conference in Beirut. "We did so, so that (coalition forces) wouldn't say later that they did not know" what their responsibilities were.

"Only the Iraqis are able to determine their own political future. But monitoring human rights is an international task," Chibli Mallat, a Lebanese lawyer, concluded.