

Reports of torture in Iraq dismay human rights and peace activists

Joshua J. McElwee | Nov. 9, 2010



Iraqi soldiers sit alongside blindfolded detainees in the back of a pickup truck as they drive along a road in Baghdad Oct. 24. (AFP/Salam Faraj)

Peace and human rights activists have expressed anger and dismay in the wake of the leak of a new set of classified Iraq war documents indicating the continued abuse of detainees by both U.S. and Iraqi coalition forces.

The documents -- together known as the "Iraq War Logs," comprising some 400,000 pages of classified military logs covering coalition forces' actions during nearly the entire length of the Iraq war -- are the latest to be leaked by the international organization WikiLeaks, which released 90,000 documents on the Afghan war July 25.

Billed by that organization as "the largest classified military leak in history," the documents in the new leak were given to several international publications, with the first published Oct. 22 and others published since.

While the documents paint a grim picture of life on the ground in Iraq, covering a wide range of events, some of the most chilling reports contained within them concern abuse of detainees.

Britain's *The Guardian* newspaper reported Oct. 22 that many of the documents, which date from 2004 through 2009, describe U.S.-backed Iraqi forces shackling, blindfolding and hanging prisoners by wrists or ankles, and then subjecting them to whipping, punching, kicking or electric shocks. In interviews with *NCR*, several human rights activists said they thought the most important information to emerge from the newly released documents is that the use of torture has continued in Iraq, at least through 2009, the last year covered by the documents. They said torture seems to have been commonplace among Iraqi forces.

"One of the profound things we learned is that Iraqi security forces have been maintaining a large network of prisons and detainment facilities in which detainee abuse and torture is allegedly rife," said Jeremy Varon, associate professor of history at the New School for Social Research in New York City.

Varon, who is an organizer with Witness Against Torture, an organization that has worked to expose and stop the use of torture in U.S. detention facilities, drew a harsh conclusion: "Americans got out of the Abu Ghraib business ... and the Iraqis did some of the same horrible things and worse to prisoners."

Dave Robinson, the executive director of Pax Christi USA, was similarly appalled, pointing to a contradiction in U.S. policy. He said the U.S. government tried to justify its invasion of Iraq, in part, as a means of protecting human rights, but that the documents reveal a continued disregard for human rights within the country.

‘If it’s true that numbers and numbers of abuses ... were occurring under the U.S.-backed Iraqi government, then it completely undermines the ... justification of the invasion,’ Robinson said.

The invasion, he said, was ‘supposed to remedy the human rights abuse situation in Iraq for the Iraqi people.’

Rights activists interviewed by *NCR* said the documents should force new questions about the U.S. Iraqi military effort, beginning with whether these new abuses will be officially investigated and who should do the investigations.

The U.N.’s special rapporteur on torture, Manfred Nowak, called on President Obama to open an ‘independent and objective’ investigation of the torture reports, and the U.N. high commissioner for human rights, Navi Pillay, said culprits of torture should be brought to justice. However, peace and rights activists expressed skepticism that such moves would take place.

‘It might be helpful if nongovernmental organizations or a group of prominent intellectuals ... were to hold a war crimes tribunal in the tradition of Bertrand Russell and Jean Paul Sartre,’ said Michael Foley, a professor of history at the University of Sheffield in Yorkshire, England, and codirector of its Centre for Peace History. ‘Maybe that would give the U.N. or the International Criminal Court the courage to open an inquiry or bring charges against American officials.’

Foley, who has studied and written extensively on the Vietnam War, compared initial media coverage of the latest leaks with that given to the Pentagon Papers, released to *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* in 1971, detailing failed U.S. Vietnam policies.

The key difference in media coverage between the two leaks, Foley said, is a change among mainstream media to privilege ‘the government’s version of events over others.’

Media organizations, he said, ‘seem not to think of themselves as having responsibility for exposing horrors without somehow having to ‘seek the other side’ of the story as if there might be some way to ... justify torture.’

Activists who spoke to *NCR* seemed determined to continue their work.

Said Matt Daloisio of Witness Against Torture: ‘We have to remember that there are still groups of people who are concerned. We have to speak up and offer hope.’

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