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Iraqi government must respect and protect rights of Camp Ashraf residents

Amnesty International urges the Iraqi government to cease its harassment of Iranian exiles living in Camp Ashraf, north of Baghdad, and to ensure that they have unhindered access to medical care and other humanitarian needs.

The Iraqi government opposes the continued existence of Camp Ashraf, which is home to some 3,400 Iranian exiles and refugees, mostly members and supporters of the People's Mojahedin Organization of Iran (PMOI), who have lived in Iraq since they were allowed to move there during the rule of Saddam Hussain. Most recently, during a visit to Iran on 25 June, Iraqi President Jalal Talabani declared that Camp Ashraf would be closed by the end of 2011 and said a "tripartite committee" had been established including the governments of Iraq and Iran and the International Red Cross to achieve this and "shut down the camp of this terrorist group". Iraqi Foreign Affairs Minister Hoshyar Zebari, also visiting Iran, was reported to have echoed this announcement but two days later the International Committee of the Red Cross denied that it would play any role in the closure of Camp Ashraf.

This new challenge to the existence of Camp Ashraf follows months in which the residents have come under increasing pressure from the Iraqi authorities. Following the US-led invasion of Iraq that toppled Saddam Hussain from power in 2003, the camp and its residents were placed under US protection but this ended in mid-2009 following an agreement between the US authorities and the Iraqi government. Barely a month later, on 28-29 July 2009, Iraqi security forces stormed into the camp; at least nine residents were killed and many more were injured. Thirty-six residents who were detained were allegedly tortured and beaten. They were eventually released on 7 October 2009; by then they were in poor health after going on hunger strike.

Earlier this year, on 8 April, Iraqi troops took up positions within the camp using excessive, including lethal, force against residents who tried to resist them. Troops used live ammunition and by the end of the operation some 36 residents, including eight women, were dead and more than 300 others had been wounded. Following international and other protests, the Iraqi government announced that it had appointed a committee to investigate the attack and the killings; however, as on other occasions when the government has announced investigations into allegations of serious human rights violations by its forces, the authorities have yet to disclose the outcome, prompting questions whether any investigation was, in fact, carried out.

Since the April attack, camp residents who were seriously injured are reportedly finding it extremely difficult to obtain permission to travel outside the camp's confines in order to receive more specialized medical treatment than is available there. The Ashraf Committee, a committee established by the Iraqi authorities to control all movement of goods and people into and out of Camp Ashraf, has very often rejected requests to issue such permits. At least five residents are said to have died at the camp in recent weeks from injuries sustained on 8 April because they

were prevented from travelling to hospitals outside the camp or were permitted to do so only after delays.

On 11 June 2011 Mansour Hajian died as a result of serious wounds to the chest. He was allowed to be transferred to a Baghdad hospital, but doctors there could not treat him and advised that he should be taken to Erbil because of better medical facilities being available there. Instead he was taken back to Camp Ashraf. The Ashraf Committee reportedly refused to give him permission to travel to Erbil for treatment. It was only after the intervention of the United Nations Assistance Mission for Iraq (UNAMI) that the Committee allowed Mansour Hajian to travel by private means to Erbil on 23 May but without giving him the necessary written permission. At a checkpoint outside Erbil he and the people with him were told by Kurdish security forces that they could not enter the city without permission from the Ashraf Committee. He was returned to Ashraf where his health deteriorated drastically in the following few days. He was then transferred to the hospital in Baghdad to which he had originally gone and died there the day after his arrival.

Several residents are said to be in need of more specialized treatment for either wounds sustained in the April 2011 attack or for serious illnesses such as cancer, but have reportedly been denied permission to travel outside the camp to receive treatment. For example, Gholamreza Khorrami is still suffering from head injuries and a fractured jaw sustained in the 8 April attack. He was first transferred to a hospital in Ba'quba but the doctors there could not treat him because of the seriousness of the injuries. He was taken back to Ashraf Camp, but managed to obtain permission from the Ashraf Committee to go to Erbil, where he received treatment. Having returned to Ashraf Camp, he reportedly now needs further treatment, but has been unable to obtain renewed permission to leave from the Ashraf Committee.

Some Camp Ashraf residents also allege that the Iraqi authorities are not allowing them to buy basic medicines and are blocking the entry of fuel into the camp, apparently with the intention of making life increasingly difficult for the residents to the point where they are forced to leave the camp.

Amnesty International has repeatedly urged the Iraqi government to fully respect the human rights of the residents of Camp Ashraf, to investigate the attacks on the camp by Iraqi security forces and to ensure accountability for unlawful killings, torture and other violations.

In particular, Amnesty International continues to seek assurances from the Iraqi government that no action will be taken to forcibly return Camp Ashraf residents to Iran, where the organization fears many would be at grave risk of torture or other serious human rights violations on account of their association with the PMOI, which formerly engaged in armed opposition to the Iranian government.

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