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Human Rights Watch

Iraq: Attacks by Government-Backed Thugs Chill Protests

Joe Stork, deputy Middle East director at Human Rights Watch

Security Forces Offered No Protection; Joined Assaults

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(Baghdad) - Iraqi authorities should order a prompt and impartial inquiry into the role of state security forces in attacks by pro-government gangs against peaceful demonstrators in Baghdad on June 10, 2011, Human Rights Watch said today. The groups of mainly young men, armed with wooden planks, knives, iron pipes, and other weapons, beat and stabbed peaceful protesters and sexually molested female demonstrators, witnesses told Human Rights Watch.

In the days following the attack, Human Rights Watch interviewed more than 25 demonstrators who said they were punched, beaten with sticks or other weapons, or stabbed during the June 10 assault. Human Rights Watch observed and witnesses said that security forces stood by and watched in several instances. Several organizers told Human Rights Watch that the attacks have had a severe chilling effect on people exercising their right to peaceful assembly. In the two Friday demonstrations since then, on June 17 and 24, many regular protesters and organizers have stopped attending the demonstration, mainly because of fear of attacks, they said.

"Instead of protecting peaceful demonstrators, Iraqi soldiers appear to be working hand in hand with the thugs attacking them," said Joe Stork, deputy Middle East director at Human Rights Watch. "The Iraqi government needs to investigate why the security forces stood by and watched as thugs beat and sexually molested protesters - and take action against those who did so."

Two separate Defense Ministry sources told Human Rights Watch that a ministerial order authorized more than 150 plainclothes security forces from both the police and army to infiltrate the June 10 protests. The sources indicated that the government was worried about increased numbers of demonstrators on that date because the 100-day period for improvements that Prime Minister Nuri al-Malaki had promised in February would have ended.

During the attacks, four government supporters, some carrying planks and chasing after demonstrators, identified themselves to Human Rights Watch as members of Iraqi security forces. Two others showed Human Rights Watch concealed Interior Ministry police ID badges.

"It's not every day that thugs with clubs flash their police IDs at us," Stork said. "The government needs to find out who was responsible for the assaults and punish them appropriately."

Protesters told Human Rights Watch that when they arrived at Baghdad's Tahrir Square on June 10 for their regular Friday demonstrations against the government, they found the area already occupied by thousands of government supporters and hundreds of army troops. Human Rights Watch saw the government supporters threaten and then attack unarmed protesters.

The assailants also assaulted at least eight female demonstrators by beating and groping them or attempting to remove their clothing, and taunting them as "whores" and using other sexually degrading terms.

Despite the tight security surrounding the protest site, Human Rights Watch witnessed multiple instances in which government supporters chased and beat protesters as army troops stood by. In some cases, the soldiers laughed as they watched. Uniformed Iraqi soldiers also handed out food and beverages to the government supporters, including frozen bottles of water, some of which were used to beat protesters.

As a state party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, Iraq is obligated to protect the right to life and security of the person, and the rights to freedom of expression, association, and peaceful assembly, Human Rights Watch said.

Human Rights Watch received no response from a government spokesman to requests for information about the involvement of security forces in the June 10 attack.

"Prime Minister Maliki's government has an obligation to protect people peacefully exercising their right to free expression and assembly," Stork said. "The US and other governments claiming to support democratic reform and accountability should press the Iraqi government to stop these inexcusable assaults."

Iraq's Widening Crackdown on Peaceful Protests

As they have every Friday since February 25, 2011, hundreds of demonstrators arrived in Baghdad's Tahrir Square in small groups on the morning of June 10 to protest official corruption and the lack of government services. That morning, thousands of government supporters filled the square, many

carrying identical 2x4 style wooden planks and shouting slogans in support of Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki.

The government supporters warned the rival protesters to leave or face violence, and then attacked those who refused to leave. Human Rights Watch observed bruises, lacerations, and indications of blunt force trauma on the heads, torsos, and extremities of protesters who were interviewed in the days following the attack.

One protester had a bleeding laceration on the right side of his abdomen when Human Rights Watch spoke with him on June 12:

Someone warned me to leave, that we would be dragged and beaten. All of a sudden, everyone surrounding us was carrying planks and screaming that we were Baathists [Saddam Hussein's former ruling party] and terrorists. They yelled, "All of us are with you, Maliki! All of us with you, State of Law [Maliki's political party]!" They were hitting us, and I was stabbed. Three women thought they would be spared the violence and tried to protect us, but they were cut with the knives, too. On the loudspeaker, they were saying, "If you don't leave, you will be beheaded." We escaped by holding onto each other for support and running away.

A protester who uses crutches because of a medical condition said assailants knocked him to the ground and hit him while he tried to help another protester who was being attacked.

Three demonstrators who had been injured in the attack told Human Rights Watch separately that they avoided seeking medical help for fear of arrest. The protester who had been stabbed in the abdomen said, "We were scared to be taken by an ambulance or to go to the hospital, because now they are using ambulances to arrest people."

In recent weeks, Iraqi authorities have detained, interrogated, and beaten several protest organizers in Baghdad. In one incident, on May 27, men in civilian clothing assisted by uniformed security forces arrested four student protesters, who were then held by the authorities until June 7. All four students and three witnesses to the arrests, told Human Rights Watch that security forces had used an ambulance to detain and remove them from the protest area.

"As they arrested me, they put a bag over my head to blindfold me," one student said. "Once I was put in a vehicle, I could see a little bit under the bag, and was surprised to see an oxygen tank and other medical equipment and realized I was in an ambulance. When they took me out of the ambulance, I saw it was the same kind that had been parked at the protest."

Attacks on Female Demonstrators

Among the female demonstrators who were sexually attacked on June 10, a 19-year-old the following day showed Human Rights Watch swelling in her mouth around a broken tooth and bruises on her abdomen. She told Human Rights Watch that she was groped by several men, who forced their hands into her pants:

I saw that those who were yelling at us started attacking a woman from our group. I tried to get to her, but I was pulled down to the ground and was then being hit, mostly in my stomach. I tried to get up, but I got hit in the face, and my tooth was broken. I fell back to the ground and was still being hit, and they restrained my hands. One of them unzipped my pants and tried to pull them off. I was kicking and trying to free myself. They called me a whore and yelled that they were going to make an example of me, so others wouldn't come to demonstrate. I felt that I was going to be raped, from what they were doing.

Another female protester told Human Rights Watch:

Not long after we arrived, many people surrounded us. Some men behind me were touching me all over, and put their hands under my clothes. I tried to stop someone who was doing this, and he grabbed my wrist and pulled my hands back. While they were holding me, they yelled that I was a whore and asked how much I charged to do sexual acts. I know the army could see us from where we were, because I made eye contact with them.

A protester with bruises on her shoulder, thigh, and back, said, "First, they took away my sign, saying that we were all bitches and whores. After that, I was knocked on the ground, dragged and getting hit all over. I thought they were kidnapping me."

Another woman protester said:

At the security check on the way in, one of the women who was searching females said we should not go into the square today, that it would be very bad for us. We didn't realize how bad it would get, and continued in. After they started to hit us and I was trying to get away, I heard someone say, "This bitch is with them. Hit her."

A 51-year-old female protester told Human Rights Watch that thugs punched her in the chest and took away her sign. Another woman reported being hit in the back with a stick while trying to escape.

Security Forces' Lack of Response

Human Rights Watch observed hundreds of state security personnel surrounding the protest site on June 10, but they failed to intervene to stop attacks or to disarm or arrest the attackers. Human Rights Watch witnessed multiple incidents in which government supporters chased and beat protesters as army troops stood by, and in some cases even laughed.

The protester who was stabbed in the abdomen said, "We were searched many times on the way in by security [army] forces, and they prevented most of us from bringing signs in - even an Iraqi flag, but the crowds of Maliki supporters were walking in without even being searched."

More than 20 protesters told Human Rights Watch they saw government supporters carrying small knives, iron pipes, box cutters, stun guns, and even handguns. The most prevalent weapons used by assailants were 2x4-style wooden planks often used to prop up posters and banners, which the assailants carried in full view of security forces. Several of the planks observed by Human Rights Watch appeared to have no marks from staples or adhesives and may have been brought to the protest site to be used as weapons.

In one instance, Human Rights Watch saw a protester who had been attacked run up to a group of soldiers, pleading for help. The soldiers looked away. The protester fled into an opening between concrete blast walls, into an adjacent market. The soldiers then stepped aside to allow the assailants to chase him, and then moved back in front of the opening, some laughing among themselves.

Other protesters told Human Rights Watch that security forces mocked them when they approached for help. The 19-year-old protester who said she was groped told Human Rights Watch:

One of the men of our group managed to drag me away from [the men attacking her], and we ran away, as the crowd was hitting both of us. When we got out of the crowd, I was upset and I asked the army soldiers why they didn't help us. One of them told me, "We don't interfere - this is between you guys." As we walked away, soldiers surrounding the square taunted us. Some were laughing that I had been hurt, and one said, "Let them come every Friday and get beaten up. I think they will stop coming."

Another protester told Human Rights Watch, "As we walked out of Tahrir Square, many of the aggressive people followed us, threatening us and holding sticks and iron pipes in the air, as we all walked right past Iraqi security forces."

Involvement by Security Forces

In the days before the demonstration, on June 3 and June 6, two Defense Ministry sources, one a high-ranking officer, independently told Human Rights Watch of a ministry order for more than 150 plainclothes security forces from both the police and army to infiltrate the June 10 protests. The officer voiced concern over the safety of the protesters, saying the nature of the infiltration on June 10 would be "different" than in previous weeks, because the 100-day period for making improvements that Maliki had announced after the February 25 demonstration would have ended. The officer said that the government was "very sensitive about protesters coming out in large numbers on June 10 and making Maliki look bad."

During the protest, four men who were with the government supporters separately identified themselves to Human Rights Watch as members of Iraqi security forces, though they were dressed in civilian clothing and two showed Human Rights Watch concealed Interior Ministry (police) ID badges.

Unlike on previous Fridays, uniformed Iraqi soldiers handed out food and beverages, including frozen bottles of water, to the government supporters. Some of the protesters told Human Rights Watch that the government supporters used the frozen water bottles to beat them or as projectiles.

The government supporters included more than 1,000 people brought from outside the city on buses, some of which had government license plates. One protester from Baghdad told Human Rights Watch that as he walked into Tahrir Square, members of his extended family who had come by bus from Nasriyya, 370 kilometers southeast of Baghdad, recognized him and quickly removed a flag he had wrapped around his shirt that identified him as a protester. They forcibly ushered him away from his fellow protesters. "They warned me that I would get hurt by the Maliki supporters if they knew I was one of the regular protesters," he said.

The large pro-government contingent appeared to be well-organized - supporters had access to air-conditioned tents and dozens of large, professionally printed banners, including some with a big red "X" over the face of Firas al-Jabouri, a former human rights activist who had been charged with taking part in a 2006 sectarian attack on a wedding party in the city of Dujail. In the days leading up to June 10, state-sponsored Iraqiya television repeatedly broadcast a videotaped confession by Jabouri and graphic footage of a crime scene, while repeatedly referring to him as a human rights activist. Iraqi human rights advocates told Human Rights Watch that they fear that Jabouri's confession was coerced and that the government is using his alleged involvement in the Dujail attack to portray all opposition activists and demonstrators as terrorists.

On June 10, government supporters in Tahrir Square chanted that Jabouri should be executed and circulated what appeared to be an official statement from Iraq's Human Rights Ministry calling for him and his alleged conspirators to be given "the strictest punishment possible." On June 16, all 15 defendants in the Dujail case, including al-Jabouri, were convicted and sentenced to death by Iraq's Central Criminal Court.

Silencing Critics

On June 20, Baghdad-based daily newspaper *al-Mada* received notice that Qassim Atta, spokesman for Baghdad Operation Command, had filed four lawsuits against members of the newspaper staff after the leftist opposition newspaper published a series of articles and columns criticizing the treatment of protesters by the security forces and government authorities, according to the newspaper's executive editor, Amer al-Qaisi. Baghdad Operation Command, which coordinates security in Baghdad, reports directly to the prime minister's office. The four lawsuits seek a total of 8 billion Iraqi dinars (US\$6.85

million) in damages. On June 11, the al-Mada organization, a registered civil society group to which the newspaper belongs, held a news conference, presenting seven protesters who said they had been injured by government supporters in the previous day's demonstration.

The Organization for Women's Freedom in Iraq (OWFI) scheduled a Baghdad news conference on June 13 for some of the female victims who were groped and beaten on June 10 to tell their stories. OWFI staff and two journalists who were present said that three men in civilian clothes walked in as the event was about to begin and questioned local journalists in a threatening manner. Most of the journalists left, and the news conference was cancelled.

Afterward, the three men remained in the office for over an hour. Staff members of the women's organization said that when they asked the three men for identification, one of them showed a badge from the army's 6th Division. Journalists and participants said that, as they exited the office gate, they saw a large presence of army personnel and vehicles blocking the street.

Background

Iraqi authorities have taken several steps in recent months to keep protests in Baghdad from public view. On April 13, officials issued new regulations barring street protests and allowing protests only in three soccer stadiums but never enforced the regulation.

In late February, Iraqi police allowed dozens of assailants to beat and stab peaceful protesters in Baghdad. In the early hours of February 21, dozens of men, some wielding knives and clubs, attacked about 50 protesters who had set up two tents in Tahrir Square. During nationwide February 25 protests, security forces killed at least 12 protesters across the country and injured more than 100. On that day, Human Rights Watch observed Baghdad security forces beating unarmed journalists and protesters, smashing cameras, and confiscating memory cards.

Iraq's constitution guarantees "freedom of assembly and peaceful demonstration." As a state party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, Iraq is obligated to protect the right to life and security of the person, and the rights to freedom of expression, association, and peaceful assembly.

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