

US “democracy” in Iraq: death squads, torture and terror

By James Cogan
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On July 1, the WSWS wrote on the evidence gathered by Knight Ridder journalists that substantiated the widespread allegations that US-backed forces are carrying out the extra-judicial killing of suspected opponents of the US occupation.

A report detailing their findings was published on June 27—three days after one of the journalists, Yasser Salihee, was killed by a single shot to the head as he approached a US checkpoint. Salihee and fellow reporter Tom Lasseter documented dozens of cases in May and June of the corpses of men being dumped at morgues after they had been detained by the Wolf Brigade, the most prominent of the special police commando units operating under the authority of the Iraqi interior ministry.

The claims contained in the Knight Ridder story have now been backed by a feature in the July 3 edition of the *British Observer*, headlined “Revealed: grim world of new Iraqi torture camps”.

Baghdad-based investigative reporter Peter Beaumont wrote: “Six months ago, Human Rights Watch (HRW) laid out a catalogue of alleged abuses being applied to those suspected of terrorism and called for an independent complaints body in Iraq....

“To add to HRW’s allegations of beatings, electric shocks, arbitrary arrest, forced confession and detention without trial, the *Observer* can add its own charges. These include the most brutal kinds of torture, with methods resurrected from the time of Saddam; of increasingly widespread extra-judicial executions; and of the existence of a ‘ghost’ network of detention facilities—in parallel with those officially acknowledged—that exist beyond all accountability to international human rights monitors, NGOs and even human rights officials of the new Iraqi government.”

Beaumont stated: “If there is a centre to this horror, it is Baghdad’s Ministry of the Interior, and the police commando units that operate from there.” The article went to make the following specific charges:

* Prisoners are being abused and tortured on the seventh floor of the interior ministry headquarters.

* Prisoners are being tortured at interior ministry-run interrogation centres at the al-Hadoud prison in the Kharkh

district of Baghdad and in the basement of a clinic in the Shoula district.

* Torture has taken place at interior ministry centres at the al-Muthana airbase and the former National Security headquarters.

* The Wolf Brigade is using torture to extract information at its headquarters in Baghdad’s Nissor Square.

Like the Knight Ridder journalists, Beaumont reviewed morgue evidence of men whose families allege were killed after being detained in police commando custody. He also interviewed men who claimed to have been tortured by the Wolf Brigade, and spoke with Western and Iraqi officials.

Hassan an-Ni’ami, an outspoken anti-occupation cleric, was seized by police commandos in Baghdad in late May. His hideously tortured body was dumped at a morgue 12 hours later, with police handcuffs still attached to his wrist. His chest had been burned, possibly with cigarettes. He had been whipped. His nose and one arm were broken. Horrifically, his kneecaps had been drilled through with what appeared to have been an electric drill. Finally, he had been shot multiple times in the chest and head.

Another man, Tahar Mohammed Suleiman al-Mashhadani, was detained by commandos in west Baghdad. His body was found 20 days later, “tortured almost beyond recognition” according to his family. A man calling himself “Abu Ali” told Beaumont he was detained by commandos in mid-May. He said he was beaten on his feet, hung by his arms from the ceiling and threatened with being sodomised with a bottle if he did not confess to being a “terrorist”.

Torture admitted by Iraqi government

At a press conference on July 4, following the publication of Beaumont’s exposé, Iraqi government spokesman Laith Kubba baldly admitted the veracity of the *Observer* report. “These things happen. We know that,” Kubba declared. “It does not happen because the government approves it or adopts it as policy. At the end of the day, I’m sorry to say that we are living in a society where the culture now accepts these violations. I’m sorry to say the culture of violence has spread.”

Kubba’s denial that brutality is official policy is contradicted by everything that been exposed about the character of the US

occupation of Iraq since the invasion in March 2003. From the Abu Ghraib torture revelations, to the razing of Fallujah, and the daily killings of civilians by American and government troops, the Iraqi people have suffered constant repression at the hands of the US military and its local collaborators.

It is not a problem of “rogue” elements. That was underscored in June, when the head of the Iraqi government’s own human rights board, Saad Sultan, told the *Los Angeles Times* that up to 60 percent of the 12,000 detainees then in Iraq’s prisons had suffered abuse. “We’ve documented a lot of torture cases. There are beatings, punching, electric shocks to the body, including sensitive areas, hanging prisoners upside down and beating them and dragging them on the ground,” he said.

The *Times* noted: “He added that police and security forces attached to the interior ministry are responsible for most of the abuses.”

Some of abuse is not even being hidden. Alleged “terrorists”, bearing signs of torture and who have never appeared before a court, are being paraded on a television program *Terrorism in the Grip of Justice* and shown making public confessions. The program has featured Wolf Brigade commander, Abul Waleed, and is run on the state-run, US-financed Al Iraqiya network.

The formation of the interior ministry police commandos in mid-2004 flowed directly from the decision in US ruling circles to fight the Iraqi resistance with tactics modeled on the US-run counterinsurgency operations in Central America during the 1980s. It came amid the greatest challenge to the US occupation since the invasion—the uprising in Baghdad and across southern Iraq led by Shiite cleric Moqtada al-Sadr, and the failure of the US military to recapture the Sunni city of Fallujah from resistance fighters.

The turn toward the “Salvador option”—using death squads, torture and mass repression to terrorise the Iraqi population into accepting US control of the country—was signalled by the appointment of John Negroponte (the head of the US embassy in Honduras in the 1980s) as ambassador to Iraq in April 2004. Steve Casteel, a key agent in US operations in Colombia, was appointed as senior advisor to the Iraqi interior ministry. James Steele, the main US special forces advisor to El Salvadoran paramilitary squads, was put in charge of organising the Wolf Brigade.

Those whom Casteel and Steele recruited for the Wolf Brigade were former members of Saddam Hussein’s special forces and Republican Guard—veterans in mass terror against the Iraqi people. Since October 2004, they have been deployed into centres of the resistance such as Samarra, Mosul and, most recently, the suburbs of Baghdad. Reports of extra-judicial killings and other atrocities soon followed. A large number of unexplained but highly suspicious killings and abductions have also taken place, including the deaths of dozens of journalists and scores of anti-occupation clerics and academics.

The highest levels of the new Iraqi state have been accused of

involvement in extra-judicial killings. In June 2004, two eyewitnesses told Australian journalist Paul McGeough that the soon-to-be-installed interim prime minister, Iyad Allawi, had murdered six prisoners at a Baghdad prison in order to make an example of how the interior ministry police should deal with alleged insurgents. The allegations were published in two Australian newspapers—the *Age* and the *Sydney Morning Herald*.

A year later, the charges against Allawi have never been convincingly refuted or independently investigated. The only recent reference appeared in an article last month in the Australian *Sun-Herald*, which cited unnamed sources claiming that Allawi’s American special forces bodyguards and several Iraqi officials had passed lie detector tests denying that any killings took place.

The same month as Allawi was accused of carrying out summary executions, outraged US National Guardsmen stormed the interior ministry headquarters after they saw prisoners being beaten in the courtyard. They disarmed the police and searched the building. An American officer, Captain Jarrell Southall, reported that dozens of detainees they found “had bruises and cuts and belt or hose marks all over. I witnessed prisoners who were barely able to walk ...” To the shock of the Guardsmen, the US command ordered them to hand the prisoners back over to the interior ministry police and leave the facility.

Claims that the US military and the US embassy in Iraq are not aware of ongoing cases of extra-judicial killings, torture and abuse are simply false. US intelligence plays the major role in gathering information on alleged insurgents. CIA and special forces operatives advise the interior ministry. The Wolf Brigade and other police commando formations work in concert with American units. Moreover, under the terms of Iraq’s interim constitution, overall operational command of all forces in the country, and therefore legal and political responsibility, resides with the US-led occupation forces.

The character of the regime being constructed by the Bush administration in Baghdad is clear to anyone with the integrity to state the truth. Far from being a “democracy”, an apparatus of terror has been set up to suppress the opposition of the Iraqi people to the takeover of their country.

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