

UN condemns Iraq's mass hanging of accused ISIS fighters

By Bill Van Auken
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The human rights arm of the United Nations has declared that it is “shocked and appalled” over the mass hanging of 38 men accused of being members of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) or Al Qaeda at a prison in the southern Iraqi city of Nasiriyah last Thursday.

The mass execution was ordered by the government of Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi less than a week after it proclaimed victory in the war against ISIS, the Islamist militia that overran roughly a third of the country beginning in 2014. The hangings constitute yet one more war crime in the bloody US-backed war in Iraq and Syria that has claimed tens of thousands of civilian lives.

This is the second mass hanging to be carried out by the Iraqi regime in less than three months. On September 25, 42 people were executed at the same prison.

“We are deeply shocked and appalled at the mass execution on Thursday,” UN Human Rights Office spokesperson Liz Throssell told reporters in Geneva.

“Given the flaws of the Iraqi justice system, it appears extremely doubtful that strict due process and fair trial guarantees were followed in these 38 cases,” the UN spokesperson added. “This raises the prospect of irreversible miscarriages of justice and violations of the right to life.”

Amnesty International issued a statement condemning the mass hanging: “The death penalty should not be used in any circumstances and especially in Iraq, where the government has a shameful record of putting people to death after deeply unfair trials and in many cases after being tortured to ‘confess.’”

Among those executed in the latest mass hanging was a man in his 60s, who has been in Iraqi jails since 2010 as a suspected Al Qaeda member, and an accused ISIS

member who held dual Swedish-Iraqi citizenship. Sweden protested the execution, summoning the Iraqi ambassador to lodge its protest.

There are an unknown number of other foreign nationals in Iraqi jails as suspected ISIS fighters. One of those imprisoned is a 17-year-old German girl who was captured after government forces overran the ISIS-controlled stronghold of Mosul earlier this year. She had come to Iraq at the age of 15 after being contacted over the Internet by a member of ISIS promising marriage. Prime Minister al-Abadi said recently that she too could face the death penalty.

Human Rights Watch has estimated that some 20,000 individuals are currently imprisoned as suspected ISIS members in Iraq. In most cases, they have been swept up by US-backed Iraqi security forces and allied militias, which have treated every fighting-age male in areas that were under ISIS control as suspects.

“Iraqi justice is failing to distinguish between the culpability of doctors who protected lives under ISIS rule and those responsible for crimes against humanity,” said Sarah Leah Whitson, HRW’s Middle East director.

Iraqi “justice” in terror cases is based on a system of drumhead courts which convict defendants in large part based on confessions extracted through torture. Prisoners are routinely subjected to beatings with metal rods and cables, suspension in stress positions and electric shocks, along with mock executions and threats of rape of female relatives.

Those who are given summary trials on terrorism charges are, in their overwhelming majority, convicted not of carrying out any concrete terrorist action, but rather merely on the basis of suspicion of membership in the proscribed groups. The anti-terror laws have been used to suppress opposition to the regime in

Baghdad, particularly on the part of the country's Sunni minority, which had protested heavy handed government repression before ISIS established its control over a large swathe of Iraqi territory.

While the UN has protested the mass executions, the fact is that representatives of the major imperialist powers have all expressed their support for the extra-judicial killing of all those suspected of belonging to ISIS.

US Defense Secretary James "Mad Dog" Mattis repeatedly described the US strategy in Iraq and Syria as one of "annihilation," while Washington's envoy to the so-called anti-ISIS "coalition," Brett McGurk, declared that the US "mission is to make sure any foreign fighter who is here, who joined ISIS from a foreign country and came into Syria, they will die here in Syria."

This same policy was echoed by the British government, whose international development minister Rory Stewart stated in October in regard to recruits to ISIS from the UK that they had renounced "allegiance towards the British Government" and "unfortunately the only way of dealing with them will be, in almost every case, to kill them."

Similarly, French minister of the armed forces, Florence Parly declared, "If the jihadis perish in this fight, I would say that's for the best."

This policy has been faithfully implemented by the Iraqi regime in its successive US-backed sieges of ISIS-held cities including Tikrit, Fallujah and Mosul in which the wholesale destruction of urban areas and mass deaths of civilians under US bombs and shells were followed by summary torture and executions of males rounded up in the aftermath of the battles.

While the policy of "annihilation" enunciated by Washington has been realized in the mass killing of civilians, in terms of ISIS itself, its application has been highly selective.

In the siege of the Syrian "capital" of ISIS, Raqqa, US officials oversaw the mass evacuation of some 4,000 ISIS fighters to eastern Deir Ezzor province in October. Rather than killing them, they were bused out in a four-mile-long convoy together with their weapons, ammunition and explosives in order to turn them against Syrian government forces attempting to regain control of the border with Iraq and Deir Ezzor's oil fields.

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