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## The right to rule ourselves

Faced with US torture, killing and collective punishment of civilians, support for the Iraqi resistance is growing

**By Haifa Zangana**

**11/19/05 "The Guardian"** -- -- The photograph of an elderly Iraqi carrying the burned body of a child at Falluja, widely shown during the chemical weapons controversy of recent days, is almost a copy of an earlier one that Iraqis remember - from Halabja in March 1988. Both children were victims of chemical weapons: the first killed by a dictator who had no respect for democracy and human rights, the second by US troops, assisted by the British, carrying the colourful banner of those principles while sprinkling Iraqis with white phosphorus and depleted uranium.

The Falluja image is emblematic of an unjust occupation. We read last week that US troops were "stunned by what they found" during a raid on a ministry of interior building: more than a hundred prisoners, many of whom "appeared to have been brutally beaten" and to be malnourished. There were also reports of dead bodies showing "signs of severe torture". Hussein Kamel, the deputy interior minister, was "stunned" too. This feigned surprise is a farce second only to the WMD lie. Torture has continued as under Saddam's regime in detention centres, prisons, camps and secret cells well beyond Abu Ghraib.

While the US and British governments have spent the 30 months of occupation arguing for the legality of chemical weapons and the "usefulness" of torture to extract information, Iraqis have been engaged in a different struggle: to survive the increasingly harsh occupation, and to define democracy and human rights accordingly. Experiences of collective punishment, random arrest and killing are the defining features.

On October 16, for example, a group of adults and children gathered around a burned Humvee on the edge of Ramadi. There was a crater in the road, left by a bomb that had killed five US soldiers and two Iraqi soldiers the previous day. Some of the children were playing hide and seek, and others laughing while pelting the vehicle with stones, when a US F-15 fighter jet fired on the crowd. The US military

said subsequently it had killed 70 insurgents in air strikes, and knew of no civilian deaths.

Among the "insurgents" killed were six-year-old Muhammad Salih Ali, who was buried in a plastic bag after relatives collected what they believed to be parts of his body; four-year-old Saad Ahmed Fuad; and his eight-year-old sister, Haifa, who had to be buried without one of her legs as her family were unable to find it.

US forces increasingly use air strikes to reduce their own casualties. They also work with Iraqi forces on search-and-destroy missions to retaliate after a successful attack on their troops, or to intimidate the population ahead of a US-choreographed political process.

Most Iraqis are indifferent to the political timetable imposed by the occupiers - from the nominal handover of sovereignty to the bizarre three months of sectarian and ethnic wrangling about the interim government and the declaration of a "yes" vote on the draft constitution by Condoleezza Rice within hours of the ballot boxes closing. They think the whole process is intended to divert their attention from the main issues: the occupation, corruption, pillaging of Iraq's resources, and the interim government's failure on human rights.

A recent Human Rights Watch report gave fresh details of torture of detainees by US forces in Iraq. At a military base near Falluja, Mercury, abuse was not only overlooked but sometimes ordered. The report describes routine, severe beatings of prisoners, and the application of burning chemicals to detainees' eyes and skin, to make them glow in the dark. Thousands have been kept for more than a year without charge or trial, including the writer Muhsin al-Khafaji, who was arrested in May 2003.

Women are taken as hostages by US soldiers to persuade fugitive male relatives to surrender or confess to terrorist acts. Sarah Taha al-Jumaily, 20, from Falluja, was arrested twice: on October 8 she was accused of being the daughter of Musab al-Zarqawi, despite her father, a member of a pan-Arab party, having been detained by US troops for more than two months; and on October 19 she was arrested and accused of being a terrorist. Hundreds of people demonstrated, and workers went on strike to demand her release. The interior ministry states that 122 women remain detained, charged with the novel crime of being "potential suicide bombers".

As large-scale US-led military operations continue, the health situation on the ground is at breaking point. The Iraqi health infrastructure, doctors and hospital staff are unable to cope with the deepening humanitarian crisis. No wonder more Iraqis are supporting the resistance.

Armed resistance is in accordance with the 1978 UN general assembly resolution

that reaffirmed "the legitimacy of the struggle of peoples for independence ... from ... foreign occupation by all available means, particularly armed struggle". The Iraqi National Foundation Congress (INFC), an umbrella group of parties and civil society organisations, is leading political resistance. There is also civil and community resistance, involving mosques, women's organisations, human-rights groups and unions, which are linking up with international anti-war groups and anti-globalisation movements.

Most Iraqis believe that they have a right to more than a semblance of independence. The lesson history taught us in Vietnam, that stubborn national resistance can wear down the most powerful armies, is now being learned in Iraq.

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