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UN Raps Iraq for Hiding Civilian Toll

Agencies —

BAGHDAD, 26 April 2007 — The United Nations accused Iraq yesterday of withholding sensitive civilian casualty figures because it fears they would be used to paint a “very grim” picture of a worsening humanitarian crisis.

The United Nations Assistance Mission in Iraq (UNAMI) said Prime Minister Nuri Al-Maliki’s government would not release data on civilian deaths amid spiraling sectarian violence between Shiites and Sunnis.

“UNAMI emphasizes again the utmost need for the Iraqi government to operate in a transparent manner,” the mission said in its latest report on human rights in Iraq. UN officials said they were given no official reason why their requests for specific official data had been turned down. Only broad percentages were available.

“We were told that the government was becoming increasingly concerned about the figures being used to portray the situation as very grim,” United Nations Assistance Mission in Iraq (UNAMI) human rights officer Ivana Vuco told a news conference.

Maliki, whose administration has previously accused UNAMI of exaggerating civilian deaths, rejected the report as unbalanced. “The Iraqi government announces its deep reservation on the report, which lacks accuracy in the information presented, lacks credibility in many of its points and lacks balance in its presentation of the human rights situation in Iraq,” a statement from his office said.

In January, UNAMI said 34,452 Iraqi civilians were killed and more than 36,000 wounded in 2006, figures that were much higher than any statistics issued by the government.

Yesterday it said Iraq faced “immense security challenges” and a “rapidly worsening humanitarian crisis.” The UN report expressed concern at the treatment of thousands of suspects detained under a major security crackdown in Baghdad, and about reports of collusion between Iraqi forces and some militias.

It also said academics, journalists, doctors and members of religious and ethnic minorities were increasingly being killed, intimidated or kidnapped by armed groups.

At least 37,641 people were being held in US and Iraqi run prisons across the country as of the end of March, the UNAMI said. Citing figures from the Ministry of Human Rights, UNAMI said that of these about 3,000 have been detained since the Baghdad security crackdown began on Feb. 14.

UNAMI said the US-led coalition forces are holding 17,898 people detained in operations across the country since the March 2003 invasion. The Iraqi Ministry of Justice holds 9,965, the Ministry of Interior has 5,573, the Ministry of Defense 1,525, the Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs 502, while another 2,178 were detained by authorities in Kurdistan. The UNAMI also criticized US-led coalition forces for their practice of “indefinite internment of detainees,” thousands of whom have been held for long

periods without charge or trial.

The UNAMI also said that more than 700,000 Iraqis fled their homes amid the sectarian violence that surged after the bombing of a Shiite complex in 2006. UNAMI said these people were in addition to the 1.2 million displaced before last year's demolition of the complex in the town of Samarra.

"Some 117,901 families or estimated 707,000 persons have been forced to flee their homes due to sectarian violence since the bombing of the Al-Askari complex in Samarra on Feb. 22, 2006," UNAMI said.

The report further said that up to eight million Iraqis were in "vulnerable" position and needed immediate assistance.

"A total of 1.9 million are internally displaced and four million are estimated to be acutely vulnerable due to food insecurity," it said, adding the worst affected governorates are from central and southern parts of Iraq.

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