

Media

Giuliana Sgrena: Free her!

Editor's note, February 12, 2005: So people around the world may know her work, Il Manifesto has provided the following articles by Giuliana Sgrena, the Italian newspaper's unembedded reporter covering the Bush administration's illegal invasion and current occupation of Iraq, who was abducted February 4 in Baghdad.

Interview with an Iraqi woman tortured at Abu Graib

By Giuliana Sgrena, Baghdad

Il Manifesto, 1 July 2004

In the middle of the night, American soldiers broke into the home of Mithal al Hassan and arrested both her and her son. The soldiers later ransacked the apartment. Denounced as part of a vendetta, Mithal was condemned without trial to 80 days of horror in the company of other women prisoners who, like her, were subjected to abuse and torture. She has since spotted her tormentors on the Internet.

I had agreed to meet Mithal al Hassan in a hotel: 'I would prefer to talk on neutral ground,' she said, adding, 'at home, with my children around, I feel embarrassed.' But that appointment never came off. Having slipped into the Hotel Palestine, the sight of the cowed employees and the American soldiers had frightened her off. After all, she still hasn't had her ID papers returned. It took us hours to track her down again, but when we did she agreed to another meeting, this time at her apartment.

She has a comfortable home—especially when the power cuts end—in a nice part of town, with TV, CD player, and computer. Her youngest daughter, just 14, came to the door, then vanished, only to reappear later with soft drinks, chocolates and grapes. Mithal was completely enveloped in her baya—not the shapeless black cloak worn by Shiite women in the poorer districts—but a wholly embroidered black dress, complete with veil. The dark kajal eyeshadow she was wearing emphasised the grey-green colour of her large eyes. Mithal got divorced eight years ago now. Her husband remarried and moved to Libya. She has had to bring up their seven children single-handed, working first in a bakery and then as a taxi-driver.

'All Saddam taught us was how to work hard', she says. Her strength and her pride both emerge clearly when we come to speak of Abu Graib and the painful events that have been tormenting her these last few months. It's a long story and the details are harrowing. For Mithal, it was 80 days of hell.

At Dead of Night They Broke Down the Door

'It was 2.30 a.m. on the night of 28 February 2004, when the American soldiers broke down our door. When Saddam was in power, every now and then the local mukhtar [formally a 'people's representative'] would turn up with his men to check on what we were doing, but at least they would ring the bell. Once the Americans were in the apartment, they began to ransack the place, and then they arrested me. They also took all our papers and keys, and the seven million dinars [about four thousand US dollars], that I had scraped together by selling our two cars. I had been going to use the money to pay off my debts.' At this point Mithal showed us the report of the police raid that appeared in the newspaper, Zaman. '

They asked me,' Mithal resumed, 'if I knew Hassib. It so happens that our neighbour's name is Hassib, though everyone calls him Abu Aya. Anyway, the Americans were searching for a certain Hassib, an arms dealer. I eventually discovered that the man they were looking for was a Syrian official, nothing to do with my neighbour.'

It turned out that what had triggered the raid was a vendetta. It's quite a complex story. The 'information' that had led the Americans to Mithal al Hassan's door had been supplied by the occupants of premises that had once been home to the Ministry of Information. The said occupants had stolen some generators and the people living nearby, including Mithal, had denounced them for the theft. As a result, Mithal and her 38-year old son were arrested.

'They dragged me down five flights of stairs, still in my nightdress. I only just managed to grab hold of my baya on my way out the door,' Mithal related. 'They took me to Sujud Palace, which had been named after Saddam's wife, Sajida. On the way there they pointed out to me a man in a jellaba with a bag over his head, tied to a tree. It was my son. I recognised him by his trousers. They dragged him over to where I was and took the bag off his head. He had been horribly tortured, with deep cuts to his head. Then they said to him, "Say goodbye to your mother." After that, they put the bag back on his head and tied to him to a post again. Then a soldier dragged me off again. He was in a real hurry. My head was covered and my hands were bound behind my back. My baya wasn't properly buttoned up so it trailed around my feet and kept tripping me up. I couldn't run properly, it was cold and I was shivering. Then the soldier threw me to the ground. My feet were bare and I tried to warm them up by pushing them into the sand. Eventually they took me to a room and wrapped me up in a blanket. I felt I was suffocating and kept hammering my feet on the ground to make some noise. Then they turned up with the photos of my children. When I saw them, I began to weep, but they just yelled at me, "where's all that strength that Saddam gave you?" Then, throwing the photos on the ground, they shouted, "Say goodbye to your children. You'll not be seeing them for 30years." I didn't believe it. I've read about psychology and I know that such methods are used to scare people. Later they brought my son back and left us alone together. My son asked me if it was true that I was one of Saddam's agents. How was it possible for my son to ask me such a question after all the sacrifices I had made to bring them up? I'm just a poor woman from Najaf, a Shiite, and Saddam certainly never loved us Shiites. How could I have been an agent of his? The soldiers had even told my son to confess that he knew Hassib and that if he did they would release him. Then they took him away again. That was the last I heard of him until I was able to return home. He had been set free the following day.'

The Kind Woman Soldier

Mithal rubs her hands together, recalling how they had turned black from being bound too tightly, so tightly that she had been unable to move them. But then a kind woman soldier had untied them so Mithal could go to the toilet.

'She was the first kind person I met. She even helped me tie my hair up. And afterwards when she bound my hands again, she left them fairly loose. So I gave her my earrings. Then they loaded me into a van, spread me out on the floor so nobody would see me, and drove me to the airport. There I was led into a big room where there was a doctor who wanted me to undress. I refused, saying that I was a Muslim and therefore couldn't do what he asked. Then he threatened to cut the clothes off me. I asked him if I could at least keep my underwear on and he agreed to that. In the end, however, he only checked my wrists. Then they moved me to another room, a huge place, for questioning. The interrogator was a woman in civilian clothes, but there were two men sitting in a corner. They had taken all my ID papers from my apartment but the first thing they questioned me about was the number of papers I had: apart from my ID card, my food ration card and the residence certificate that had been compiled by the police and signed by a lieutenant. My interrogator insisted that I was that lieutenant. I replied that if I had worked for the police by my age I would be a colonel, at the very least. Then there was the word mutallaka ['divorced'] on my ID card. According to the interpreter, who was of Iraqi origin but had been living abroad for the last 45 years, the word was really mutlak, which means 'absolute'. This, they maintained, signified some kind of recognition by Saddam. They were all shouting at once. Eventually they took me to a cell: one metre by a

metre and a half and nothing but a bottle of water. They left me there for six nights. One day they made me lean up against the wall with my hands in the air, but I wasn't strong enough to remain in that position. Then the black woman soldier arrived and kept yelling in my face, but since I wasn't getting scared she eventually apologised and said, "You're brave."

This was just the beginning of Mithal's ordeal.

'Sometimes they'd turn the heating right up and to get to sleep I'd have to splash myself with the little water they gave me. There were times when they didn't give me any water or food at all. Then, from the neighbouring cells I could hear the screams of the men who were being tortured, sounds of weeping and screaming that were recorded and played back all night long full-blast, along with other sounds like approaching footsteps on gravel, but the ground there was nothing but sand. There was no way you could sleep. I hated their food. I couldn't stand things any more. In the end I asked if I could write a note for my children, because I wanted to commit suicide.'

The psychological torture continued. Then, at a certain point, they told Mithal that she was on a list of prisoners earmarked for release. They told her to get her things together. But it wasn't freedom that awaited her.

'They led me to a huge, freezing room. My teeth were chattering from the cold. There on display was an entire set of torture instruments. They blindfolded me with sticky tape and then, along with 13 men, they put me on a helicopter. The flight didn't take long, less than an hour.'

Mithal and the others were taken to Abu Graib.

'On arrival, they first of all examined our bodies, hair, and teeth, recording everything on a computer. I felt ill. I was suffering from an allergy and couldn't eat anything any longer so Um Iraq, one of the interpreters, an Iraqi woman from abroad, gave me some bananas to eat. I needed medicines but they said they didn't have any.'

I asked her if she was held on her own all the time.

'No. It was then that they put me in a cell with other women, two women per cell. There were 13 women, mainly wives of men belonging to the previous regime, and seven children. There was even the wife of Sabah Merza, one of Saddam's guards in the 1970s, who kept her hands plunged in ice to soothe the pain caused by the torture that had been inflicted on her. Another woman was in really bad shape: they'd kept hurling her against the wall. Another had been locked in a tiny cage for six days and couldn't even move. One of the prisoners had been forced to walk on all fours and her knees and elbows were in a terrible state. Another woman had been forced to separate faeces from urine, using her own hands. The soldiers frequently forced us to drink water from the toilet bowl. A woman of 60, who had said she was a virgin, was continually threatened with rape.'

Did you know of cases of rape?

'Yes, but I'm not going to go into that. In our society, it's something you don't talk about.'

How old were the women prisoners?

'Between 40 and 60 years of age.'

And what about children, how were they treated?

'We heard them screaming. They were tortured too. Mostly dogs were set on them.'

So how did your release come about?

'In the end, in part I think because of the pressure maintained by the resistance, they decided to release me. They even gave me back my earrings. They wanted to drive me to my apartment but I refused. After everything I had been through, I didn't want to be mistaken for a collaborator. And because I refused to leave on the 21 May, I was held until the 23rd, two more days under a filthy tent, where I collapsed.'

Have you seen the pictures of the torture at Abu Graib? Did you recognise anyone?

'Yes, I saw them on the Internet. I recognised several detainees, for example Abdul Mudud, the brother-in-law of Al Duri, who had had his jaws broken and an eye put out. I also recognised some of the soldiers. Sometimes they made a hundred or more prisoners lie on the ground and then trampled them underfoot.'

What do you think of the resistance?

'The United States have occupied our country, we have the right to defend ourselves. Resistance is self-defence. But killing Iraqis is not resistance.'

Aren't you afraid of speaking about what you saw?

'I've done nothing wrong. Why should I be afraid?'

Two thousand victims in Fallujah, according to the Iraqi government The UN reports that the number of children suffering from malnutrition has doubled

By Giuliana Sgrena, Iraq

Il Manifesto, 26 November 2004

This month of November will be remembered as one of the bloodiest of the occupation. Since the beginning of the month, which is not yet finished, 109 Marines have been killed, a figure already greater than that of the earlier attack on Fallujah, last April. But it is above all the Iraqis who are paying the highest tribute : 2,085 killed in the attack, according to the information given out by Iraqi Security Minister Quassim Daud, without specifying the number of civilians.

The problem, says the minister, is that of identification, as many of the victims were not carrying documents. But many observers say that the problem is that many of the bodies were unrecognisable because they were so carbonised that the use of napalm was suspected.

At the same time as the victim count from Fallujah, more disturbing news is arriving from Oslo in the form of the report of an investigation conducted by the Iraqi Health Ministry, in conjunction with the Norwegian FAFO Institute for applied international studies and UNDP, into the health of Iraqi children. The report states that since the beginning of the war (March 2003) the number of Iraqi children under the age of 5 suffering from acute malnutrition has doubled, passing from 4 to 7.7 percent. Further, over 400,000 are suffering from chronic diarrhoea and protein deficit.

The World Food Programme distributes food to 1.7 million children, and the programme has delivered a lot of food, says Jon Pederson of the FAFO Institute, so even though malnutrition is to be expected, it is difficult to understand why the figures are so high. And one wonders what would have happened if the UN had not been there to make up for some of the privations that have worsened under the occupation (and were already severe in the period of embargo).

As regards the adults, in the month of September 6.5 million Iraqis were totally dependant on the distribution of rations. The lack of electricity, and therefore the impossibility for many to boil water, is a further contribution to the deteriorating public health situation. The infrastructures, including the sewage system are in a very sorry state. It is estimated that 60 percent of the people in rural areas and 20 percent of those in the cities have no access to safe drinking water.

These are the conditions of life that daily feed the anger of the population, which is opposed to the occupation. The occupying forces, however, are too busy making war, which never ends, to prepare the ground for the elections; and seem not to realise that this “pacification” does not guarantee security (as is evident every day), and nor does it secure a consensus for the elections called by the Government of Allawi, in the service of the Americans.

Yesterday the American respected their own traditions, eating their Thanksgiving turkey in their Iraqi bases, and baptising their new offensive in the South of Baghdad “Plymouth Rocks” in its honour. This offensive involves 3,000 Marines, a thousand members of the Iraqi National Guard, and hundreds of Black Watch soldiers from the British contingent, brought up from Bassora to reinforce the Americans for their attack on Fallujah.

Yesterday it was the Black Watch who attacked the villas on the Euphrates to the south of the capital that were formerly used by Saddam's nomenklatura for their leisure time, the objective being to hunt out Saddam's old faithfuls and their arms caches. The soldiers arrested 80 Iraqis and requisitioned equipment suspected of being destined for the production of bombs. Nothing compared to the arsenal the Americans say they have found in Fallujah. “There are enough arms here to supply the resistance in the whole of Iraq,” they said. They also claimed to have found a laboratory and instructions for the fabrication of chemical weapons.

In the ‘triangle of death’ the attack has not been so massive as in Fallujah. “In the next few days we will undertake a series of concentrated attacks . . . characterised by precision, patience and perseverance, the keys to successfully countering an insurrection” said Captain David Nevers of the Marines yesterday, explaining the “surgical attacks.” The same day numerous explosions were heard in Baghdad., and clouds of smoke were also rising from the green zone. Just outside the green zone an American “adviser” to the Ministry of Education was killed yesterday. The Al Zarqawi group claimed responsibility for the operation.

In trying to avoid the Sunni boycott of the elections, proclaimed by the ulemas and threatened by the Iraqi Islamic Party if the elections are not postponed for six months, the Electoral Commission has moved back the final date for presentation of lists of candidates by a week, till the 2nd December. But it hardly seems likely that a week will make the difference and guarantee the participation of the Sunni triangle in these elections.

Ten thousand Iraqis in US and British prisons

Number of detainees rises in an offensive launched by the occupation forces with the elections in view

Among the prisoners are 350 foreigners accused of terrorism.

By Giuliana Sgrena

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Ten thousand prisoners are still locked in American and British prisons in Iraq. Most are Iraqis but there are also 350 foreigners. The figures were supplied by the Iraqi Minister of Human Rights, Bakhtiar Amin.

These numbers are in strong contrast with the claims made some time ago by the Americans that the number of prisoners had been considerably reduced after the releases following the scandal of Abu Ghraib. Apparently the number of prisoners has been swelled by numerous arrests of the survivors of the attacks on Samarra, Falluja and Mosul.

According to Minister Amin, the breakdown of the prison population is: 4,691 prisoners in Camp Bucca, near the port of Umm Qasr and 818 at Al Shuaiba (Bassura), both under British control; 3,411 are to be found at the notorious torture site, Abu Ghraib; 104, on the other hand, are “special” detainees, among them Saddam Hussein, who is being held in isolation in Camp Cropper near Baghdad Airport.

It was predictable that the number of detainees would rise as a result of the campaign launched by the occupation forces, with the support of the pro-American government of Allawi, to eliminate resistance in view of the forthcoming elections. This was confirmed by Riyadh al Adhadh, in charge of environmental policy of the Citizens Council of Adhamiya (Baghdad), in his testimony to the Rome forum of the World Tribunal on Iraq on 17 December. In the course of his duties he had been able to visit the prisons, where he said he had also found children under 16 and people over 63.

The disturbing fact, apart from the numbers, is the treatment of prisoners in open violation of all international conventions: pictures of the tortures have been circulated around the world and the responsibility of the governors is constantly confirmed. Nor is this all. Frequently prisoners are not charged formally with any crime: the sole purpose is to extort information about the resistance, and detainees do not even have the right to the aid of a lawyer.

The occupation forces are acting in defiance of international law and with absolute impunity with respect not only to the Iraqis but also to the foreign detainees. It is in fact the foreigners who are most at risk because they are accused of terrorism and the Allawi government has already introduced the death penalty, although provisionally and without legitimacy. Furthermore, many of the foreign prisoners have been transferred to third countries for interrogation. At the end of October 150-160 fighters ended up in the dock accused of attacks on the Iraqi government; if found guilty they risk the death penalty.

At this moment, according to the Ministry of Human Rights, there are 353 foreigners in prison. The US military spokesman for prison operations, Colonel Barry Johnston, who has confirmed the overall total of detainees, does not want to make any statement about the foreigners, especially about their nationality. "We will give this information only to the government," he said.

And the Iraqi government, through Minister Amin, has announced that "American forces told us on 23 December that they are detaining 353 foreign terrorists." According to the minister, there are 61 Egyptians, 59 Saudis, 56 Syrians, 40 Jordanians, 35 Sudanese, 22 Iranians, 10 Tunisians, 10 Yemenis, 8 Palestinians and 5 Lebanese, among others. No more information is given, even in these cases, about specific charges.

The day after the message attributed to Osama bin Laden which recognized Al Zarqawi as the representative of Al Quaida in Iraq, a spurt of attacks on local police forces, starting at 6 in the morning, brought about the deaths of at least 18 policemen in the space of an hour and a half: 13 at Tikrit, one at Balad, four at Eshaqi, all places north of Baghdad.

At Mahmudiya, south of the capital, the body was found on Monday of Saadi Abdel Jabbar al Bayati, a local manager of the Communist Party who had been kidnapped on Sunday. These attacks on representatives of political parties escalated with the approach of the election deadline fixed for 30 January. Such threats will act as a deterrent to those who have not yet gone along with the boycott advocated by various forces of the "Sunni Triangle."

Osama bin Laden also came out against taking part in the vote in the message he sent out on Monday from Al Jazeera: "All those who take part in the elections in Iraq are atheists, they do not believe in God," claimed the leader of Al Quaida. His harangue against the "unbelievers"—among whom he also includes the ayatollah, Al Sistani—will nevertheless not be a decisive factor in the Iraqis' choice. His message is seen merely as interference from outside.

"Whatever bin Laden says, people have already decided not to go and vote. I haven't even registered," declared Mohammed, an inhabitant of Baghdad, to Reuters. "There's no sense risking your own life to vote when it's the Americans, in any case, who will choose who to put in power."