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Former UN human rights chief in Baghdad Tahar Boumedra: Why I Quit the UN in Iraq

By Tahar Boumedra - 08/22/12 11:54 AM ET

For the past three and a half years I have served first as chief of the United Nations Assistance Mission in Iraq (UNAMI) Human Rights Office and then as adviser to the Secretary General's Special Representative for Iraq, monitoring, among other things, the human rights and the humanitarian situation of 3,400 Iranian exiles who have made their home north of Baghdad since 1986 at a place called Camp Ashraf. Iraq's government has decided to terminate their presence in Iraq and required them to vacate Camp Ashraf. UNAMI has been facilitating their temporary relocation to a former base in Baghdad called Camp Liberty, with the purported task of conducting "refugee status determination" for all of these people and ensuring that international norms of human and humanitarian rights are maintained.

While the world assumes the United Nations has been upholding these norms, I know otherwise.

As hard as it might be for many to believe, as the United Nations serves the cause of human rights and world peace, this is a shameful story of hiding the truth and looking the other way when we knew there were violations: of complicity with wrongdoers, and neglect of human rights and humanitarian responsibilities.

The fundamental rights of these exiles — humane living conditions, access to justice, humanitarian necessities including medical services for the ill and wounded, and freedom from threats of physical harm — have been repeatedly denied by the Iraqi government at the direction of the prime minister's office. Special Representative Martin Kobler, unlike his predecessor, who maintained his mission's independence and integrity even at the displeasure of Nouri al-Maliki, has enabled the prime minister's agenda while falsifying information reported to senior U.N. leadership and the international community.

As the lead person on Camp Ashraf-related matters in UNAMI, I faced a serious moral dilemma as I saw my reports doctored and censored. No first-hand report of mine ever reached U.N. Secretary General Ban Ki-moon or top officials in New York. And while I kept silent far too long, I have now resigned and my conscience demands that I bring the truth to light. I am prepared to attest to these facts under oath.

When Iraqi forces attacked the unarmed residents of Camp Ashraf in 2009 and 2011, it was I who conducted the body count. The April 2011 raid, which took 36 lives and caused hundreds of injuries, was a massacre in which men and women alike were crushed to death by military vehicles or killed with one bullet at close range. Yet when the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights and UNAMI called for an independent commission of inquiry, the Iraqi government refused. Our repeated efforts to send severely wounded exiles to Iraqi hospitals were blocked by the Iraqi government, and some died. UNAMI never objected, reporting instead

that Iraq had met its international obligations.

When Iraq was ready to start relocating the exiles to the new site at Camp Liberty in December 2011, I made several visits to inspect Camp Liberty, and told Kobler that it was not fit to accommodate 3,400 men and women. Kobler visited Camp Liberty and saw that I was right; yet when the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) hired a consultant to assess the conditions at Camp Liberty, Kobler pressured him to certify that the camp met all required humanitarian standards, which we knew was far from the truth. After the consultant declined, Kobler issued a report that misled the international community and the exiles alike into believing the standards were being met so the transfer process could proceed.

He also had UNAMI staff take around 500 photographs at Camp Liberty, of which 20-30 of the least offensive were selected, and sent to the exiles' parent organization in Paris with the message that the new site would measure 40 square kilometers, reduced to 2.5 square kilometers. On that basis, the exiles agreed to move out of Camp Ashraf. In reality, the site at Camp Liberty measures 0.6 square kilometers and is surrounded by three-to four-meter concrete walls. It reminds me of the concentration camp I lived in as a child during Algeria's war of liberation.

Al-Maliki, with Iran's encouragement, has continuously obstructed the U.N. mission of processing these exiles as potential refugees and placing them safely in third countries. Iraq would not let UNHCR conduct interviews at Camp Ashraf, although it had done so satisfactorily in the past. Iraq refused the Camp Ashraf residents' request to cooperate with them in planning their departure. Death threats in Farsi have been broadcast for 18 hours on most days through loudspeakers surrounding Camp Ashraf, and Iraq has issued nearly 200 arrest warrants against residents with no due process. Each movement of exiles this year from Camp Ashraf to Camp Liberty has been coordinated, including dates and specific numbers, by Iraq with the Iranian Embassy in Baghdad.

Their agenda is obvious: to break the exiles' will and morale as an organized group and force their departure. UNAMI never seriously tried to arrange for a third country to host the population and UN staff so that refugee processing could be accomplished smoothly. With 2,000 exiles at Camp Liberty to date, the United Nations has interviewed only a small number, and not one person has completed refugee processing. Whether U.S. government officials involved in the relocation and processing of the exiles are aware of these realities I do not know; Kobler is their interlocutor. Foreign officials other than from the United Nations and a few consular officers have been denied access to both Camp Ashraf and Camp Liberty.

Iraq's actions toward these exiles, which for years had been accorded a guest status comparable to a foreign sovereign establishment, violate the well-established principle that a change of government does not affect acquired rights without due process of law. The United States, which earlier granted them protected persons status under the Fourth Geneva Convention and then turned over their protection to Iraq in 2009, retains the obligation under Article 45 to ensure their continued protection.

These defenseless people are facing intolerable abuses and dangers. The U.N. secretary general and willing governments need to establish conditions, in Iraq or elsewhere, enabling the United Nations to process these people properly, expeditiously and safely. Immediate action is needed to uphold their basic human rights, secure them from further threat of physical harm, and restore the United Nations's reputation.

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