

West wants end to torture, honor killings in Iraq | Reuters

GENEVA (Reuters) - Western powers pressed Iraq on Tuesday to clean up its human rights record by investigating allegations of torture, halting honor killings of women and abolishing the death penalty.

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The United States, Britain, Canada, France and Germany were among delegations to denounce continuing violations in Iraq during debate at the United Nations Human Rights Council.

"Allegations of torture are a cause for concern, and impunity should not be tolerated. We remain concerned that Iraq maintains the death penalty and that the number of executions has increased in the last two years," Peter Gooderham, Britain's ambassador to the U.N. in Geneva, told the forum that has 47 member states plus observers.

He urged Iraq to establish a moratorium on executions.

Some 79 people had been hanged in Iraq last year, France's ambassador Jean-Baptiste Mattei said.

"Nearly 900 people are waiting on death row. France urges Iraq to start on the road to abolishing the death penalty by adopting a moratorium as soon as possible and by commuting sentences already handed down," he said.

Canada, France and Germany denounced honor killings which Germany's delegate Michael Klepsch said appeared to be frequent.

"Political ownership, attacks on journalists, and religious pressure undermine the freedom of the press in the country and thus cause limitations on freedom of opinion and expression," Klepsch added.

In an opening speech, Iraq pledged to strengthen respect for human rights while tackling "terrorist groups" it accused of seeking to sow insecurity in the country.

Wijdan Michael, Iraqi minister for human rights, defended her government's record. Iraq was under scrutiny for the first time at the Geneva forum which has been examining practices in all U.N. members one by one.

"We are particularly concerned about the short period of time between sentencing and execution," Denmark's delegate Julie Garfieldt Kofoed told the talks.

The widespread use of torture of detainees including Iraqi women and children must be countered, she said.

Michael said the use of torture in interrogations was banned and the death penalty was only imposed for the worst crimes such as killings, partly to vindicate the victims' families.

Thousands of people, including women and children, have died in suicide bombings since the U.S.-led invasion in 2003, placing further challenges on the path to democracy, the minister said.

The United States commended Baghdad's efforts to investigate allegations of detainee abuse, but urged it to complete the transfer of detainees to the custody of the Justice Ministry.

"Additionally, we recommend that Iraq continue to improve conditions in ministry-operated facilities and hold accountable any law enforcement official suspected of involvement in torture, abuse or coerced confessions," Douglas Griffiths, U.S. charge d'affaires in Geneva, said.

Washington also was concerned about the protection of religious and ethnic minorities, women, and gay people and urged Baghdad to protect these groups from "targeted attacks."

Iraq also must "end intimidation and abuse of journalists by government officials," Griffiths said.

(Editing by Michael Roddy)