

ISIS holding 3,500 slaves in Iraq, says UN report

20/01/2016 21:09 by admin

Baghdad: Iraq witnessed a sharp increase in civilian deaths following the fall of large swaths of territory to the Islamic State group in the summer of 2014. Now despite a string of recent battlefield losses for IS, civilians in Iraq continue to die at a "staggering" rate, according to a new United Nations report.

At least 18,802 civilians were killed and another 36,245 were wounded in Iraq between the start of 2014 and Oct. 31 of last year, according to the U.N. report released Tuesday. In just one six-month period between May and October last year, more than 10,000 civilians were killed.

"Despite their steady losses to pro-government forces, the scourge of ISIL continues to kill, maim and displace Iraqi civilians in the thousands and to cause untold suffering," U.N. envoy Jan Kubis said in a statement, using an alternative acronym for the extremist group.

The numbers are nowhere near the death tolls recorded during Iraq's bloody civil war. In 2006 alone more than 34,000 civilians were killed, according to U.N. data.

The following year the Iraqi government refused to provide the U.N. with death toll statistics, stating that the government wanted to prevent the data from painting a negative image of the country. But civilian casualties since the rise of IS in Iraq are considerably higher than the preceding years of relative stability. In 2011, the number of civilian deaths due to violence was at its lowest since the civil war, with fewer than 2,800 killed.

U.N. human rights chief Zeid Raad al-Husseini said the civilian death toll may actually be considerably higher.

"Even the obscene casualty figures fail to accurately reflect exactly how terribly civilians are suffering in Iraq," he said in a statement.

The U.N. report also documented a wide range of human rights abuses, including the IS group's conscription of some 3,500 people into slavery. Many of those are women and children from the Yazidi religious minority who were taken hostage in the summer of 2014 and forced into sexual slavery.

It said another 800 to 900 children were abducted from Iraq's second largest city, Mosul, for religious and military training. A number of IS child soldiers were killed by the extremists when they tried to flee fighting in the western Anbar province, it said.

"ISIL in particular has used the most gruesome methods to execute people by running bulldozers over them, by burning them alive. In one case, people were put in a cage and the cage was put into the water," Ravina Shamdasani, a UN spokeswoman told The Associated Press in Geneva.

"I think this kind of violence will affect our society for the long term," said veteran Iraqi human rights activist Hana Adwar. "The culture of violence is rooted in Iraq now, it's not something that's easy to combat."

The U.N. report called the civilian death toll in Iraq "staggering." It also detailed the various methods the IS group has employed to kill its enemies, including public beheadings and throwing them off buildings.

Such acts are "systematic and widespread ... abuses of international human rights law and humanitarian law," the

report said. "These acts may, in some instances, amount to war crimes, crimes against humanity, and possibly genocide."

After IS was pushed out of the majority Yezidi town of Sinjar a number of assumed burial sites that local officials have dubbed "mass graves" were found in the town.

"They are symbols of a nation, they are symbols of Kurdistan and they represent the victims of terror," said Mahmood Salih Hama Karim, the minister with the Kurdish Regional Government responsible for overseeing excavation of the sites.

Last month Iraqi forces also advanced against IS in the country's western province of Anbar, pushing the group out of the center of the city of Ramadi.

The U.S.-led coalition fighting IS announced this month that the militants had lost 30 percent of the territory they once held in Iraq and Syria.

Baghdad-based spokesman Col. Steve Warren told reporters the extremists have lost 40 percent of their territory in Iraq and 20 percent in Syria, adding that the group is in a "defensive crouch."

IS still controls large areas of Iraq and neighboring Syria after the group swept across Iraq's north and west in the summer of 2014. It has set up a self-styled caliphate in the territories under its control, which it governs with a harsh and violent interpretation of Islamic law.

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