

## Prisoners held under England's antiterrorism legislation face psychological damage

Madeleine Brettingham *London*

People detained under the Anti-terrorism Crime and Security Act are facing potentially irredeemable psychological damage, says a research report unveiled at a press conference in London, organised by the prisoners' lawyers, at the Royal College of Psychiatrists last week.

Eight detainees interned at London's Belmarsh Prison because of suspected links with terrorist groups were interviewed for the research. All showed symptoms of severe depression and anxiety, some exhibited psychotic behaviour, and in all cases their mental health was said to have drastically deteriorated during the period of their internment.

The interviews were done for the prisoners' legal counsel by a

group of 12 forensic psychiatrists and one psychologist. But although the report was originally commissioned for legal purposes, the doctors "eventually realised that the prisoners shared common symptoms as a direct result of their predicament," said Dr James MacKeith, forensic psychiatrist at the Maudsley Hospital, London. "We would be failing in our duties as medical practitioners if we did not make this information public."

Their findings echo the work of other research into the well-being of asylum detainees in Australia and the United States. All eight of the detainees had been involved in political unrest (in Algeria, Tunisia, and Gaza) and had migrated to England as

a result of a perceived threat to their safety. Three had experiences of detention and torture, and these circumstances are understood to have affected their experiences of internment.

But it is their peculiar predicament as detainees under the antiterrorism act that the report seeks to emphasise. The secrecy and lack of due process that the act permits contribute to an exaggerated sense of "hopelessness and helplessness," said Professor Ian Robbins, a clinical psychologist at St George's Hospital, London. Prisoners are detained indefinitely, no specific charges are made against them, they have no opportunity to put their case before a tribunal, and crucial evidence against them is withheld. Professor Robbins described it as "a form of mental torture."

According to the team, the situation is not only disorienting for the prisoner, it is frustrating for the clinician. In all cases crucial background details, such as the nature of the circumstances that led to their detention, remain secret. This poses difficulties for

doctors trying to make a referral or helping in an appeal for bail. One psychiatrist described the situation as "Kafka-esque."

"Normally we determine the best course of action for patients on the basis of the risks they pose," said Dr Sophie Davison, a consultant forensic psychiatrist at the York Clinic, Guy's Hospital, London. "But we have no information, so it is impossible."

Last week the House of Lords reviewed antiterrorism legislation, in particular the issue of "proportionality," questioning to what extent it was justifiable to detain individuals indefinitely without charge in the name of national security.

"This report is about the medical effects of overriding such ordinary civil rights," the team said. "There is a strong consensus that indefinite detention is directly linked to deterioration in mental health. We are talking about the visible deterioration of a group of prisoners which is extraordinary to behold, even with our extensive experience." □

## Infectious diseases increase in Iraq as public health service deteriorates

Owen Dyer *London*

The health of Iraqis continues to decline more than 18 months after the invasion, and this year has seen a dramatic increase in the toll of infectious disease, a report released last week by the Iraqi interim government's Ministry of Health says.

Ala'din Alwan, interim health minister, presented the report to a conference of the International Reconstruction Fund Facility for Iraq in Japan last week. "More Iraqis may have died as a result of inappropriate health policies, sanctions, and neglect of the health sector over the past 15 years than from wars and violence," said Dr Alwan.

The greatest deficiencies are in primary care, public health infrastructure, and essential drugs. Fewer than a quarter of diabetic people in Iraq have access to insulin, and cancer



Hidaya al-Kaabi, aged 3, of Baghdad has a middle ear tumour, and her family has been advised to take her abroad for treatment. Cancer drugs are almost non-existent in Iraq, a new report says

drugs are almost non-existent despite an unexplained surge in cancer rates since the early 1990s. The report also notes a growing problem of post-traumatic stress disorder in children.

But the most dramatic evidence of deteriorating health is the burden of infectious disease, driven by poor sanitation and growing malnutrition. One of the most serious threats is typhoid. The report estimates that there were 5460 cases of typhoid in the first quarter of 2004. In the first half of 2004,

8253 cases of measles were reported, up from 454 cases in the whole of 2003. The ministry reported 11 821 cases of mumps in the first four months of this year, nearly double the figure for the whole of last year.

Wartime damage to water treatment facilities has gone largely unrepaired. A fifth of urban households and more than half of rural households are without access to safe drinking water, says the report.

Security concerns have impeded work on water and

sewerage facilities around Baghdad, but the most neglected area is the relatively peaceful British-run zone of Basra. Ross Mountain, UN acting special representative for Iraq, says that pre-war water levels are unlikely to be restored to Basra by the end of the year. Basra has seen some of the highest rates of diarrhoea and infectious disease.

Dr Alwan said that Iraq's population was one of the healthiest in the region in 1990, rivalling Jordan and Kuwait, but he compared Iraq's public health today with that of Sudan, Yemen, and Afghanistan. "Iraq used to have one of the best health services in the region, but Saddam did not consider it a priority. The budget was cut by 90% [during the sanctions period]," he said. The invasion itself destroyed much of what was left. One in three clinics and one in eight hospitals were looted or vandalised in the chaotic aftermath, said Dr Alwan.

Life expectancy has fallen to below 60 for both men and women, he added, and poverty has risen. One in three children are chronically malnourished, and 27% of the population now live on less than \$2 (£1.11; €1.60) a day. □