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## **Violence Said to Slow Rights Effort in Iraq; Report Lauds Steps Toward Democracy**

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The State Department yesterday depicted efforts to guard human rights in Iraq as badly hampered by a climate of "extreme violence" and by sectarian militias that often act "independently of governmental authority."

The critical assessment came in the department's annual review of the human rights records of nations around the world. Although balanced by a positive appraisal of Iraq's moves toward democracy and development of an army that has remained generally free of allegations of abuse, the section on Iraq marked a bleaker view than the one a year ago of the government's ability to protect basic rights.

"A climate of extreme violence in which people were killed for political and other reasons continued," the report said. "Reports increased of killings by the Iraqi government or its agents that may have been politically motivated. Additionally, common criminals, insurgents and terrorists undermined public confidence in the security apparatus by sometimes masking their identity in police and army uniforms."

The survey singled out seven countries as the "most systematic" rights violators: North Korea, Burma, Iran, Zimbabwe, Cuba, Belarus and China. It also faulted the records of a number of key allies -- citing Pakistan for restricting freedom of expression and association, Saudi Arabia for making arbitrary arrests and Egypt for torturing prisoners.

The report, issued annually since 1977, has frequently put the U.S. government in the position of cataloguing the abuses not only of adversaries but also of allies. But in recent years the report has become especially problematic for the Bush administration, as it has faced international criticism for its treatment of detainees in Iraq and Afghanistan and at the U.S. naval base at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba.

Yesterday's report, like its predecessors, did not include any assessment of U.S. practices and quickly drew charges of hypocrisy from leading human rights groups. Amnesty International noted that some countries cited for torturing detainees, such as Egypt and Jordan, were among those that have received prisoners from the United States, a practice known as rendition.

At a news conference, Barry Lowenkron, the State Department's assistant secretary for human rights, defended the practice. "Let me be clear: We do not send detainees to countries if we believe that they will be subjected to torture," he said.

Asked about new issues in this year's report, Lowenkron mentioned growing attention to government censorship of the Internet -- a particular concern involving China. He also cited mounting harassment of non-governmental organizations in such countries as Russia, Belarus and Venezuela.