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## Rape (and Silence About It) Haunts Baghdad

By NEELA BANERJEE

BAGHDAD, Iraq, July 15 — In her loose black dress, gold hairband and purple flip-flops, Sanariya hops from seat to seat in her living room like any lively 9-year-old. She likes to read. She wants to be a teacher when she grows up, and she says Michael, her white teddy bear, will be her assistant.

But at night, the memory of being raped by a stranger seven weeks ago pulls her into its undertow. She grows feverish and has nightmares, her 28-year-old sister, Fatin, said. She cries, "Let me go!"

"I am afraid of the gangsters," Sanariya whispered in the twilight of her hallway. "I feel like they are killing me in my nightmares. Every day, I have these nightmares."

Since the end of the war and the outbreak of anarchy on the capital's streets, women here have grown increasingly afraid of being abducted and raped. Rumors swirl, especially in a country where rape is so rarely reported.

The breakdown of the Iraqi government after the war makes any crime hard to quantify.

But the incidence of rape and abduction in particular seems to have increased, according to discussions with physicians, law-enforcement officials and families involved.

A new report by Human Rights Watch based on more than 70 interviews with law-enforcement officials, victims and their families, medical personnel and members of the coalition authority found 25 credible reports of abduction and sexual violence since the war. Baghdadis believe there are far more, and fear is limiting women's role in the capital's economic, social and political life just as Iraq tries to rise from the ashes, the report notes.

For most Iraqi victims of abduction and rape, getting medical and police assistance is a humiliating process. Deeply traditional notions of honor foster a sense of shame so strong that many families offer no consolation or support for victims, only blame.

Sanariya's four brothers and parents beat her daily, Fatin said, picking up a bamboo slat her father uses. The city morgue gets corpses of women who were murdered by their relatives in so-called honor killings after they returned from an abduction — even, in some cases, when they had not been raped, said Nidal Hussein, a morgue nurse.

"For a woman's family, all this is worse than death," said Dr. Khulud Younis, a gynecologist at the Alwiyah Women's Hospital. "They will face shame. If a woman has a sister, her future will be gone. These women don't deserve to be treated like this."

It is not uncommon in Baghdad to see lines of cars outside girls' schools. So fearful are parents that their daughters will be taken away that they refuse to simply drop them off; they or a relative will stay outside all day to make sure nothing happens.

"Women and girls today in Baghdad are scared, and many are not going to schools or jobs or looking for work," said Hanny Megally, executive director of the Middle East and North Africa division of Human Rights Watch. "If Iraqi women are to participate in postwar society, their physical security needs to be an urgent priority."

Beyda Jafar Sadiq, 17, made the simple decision to go to school on the morning of May 22 and never returned. Her family has been looking for her ever since. They have appealed to every international nongovernmental organization, the Iraqi police and the American authorities. Her eldest brother, Feras, 29, has crisscrossed the country, visiting the morgue in Basra in the south, traveling to Amara and Nasiriya on reports from acquaintances that they saw a girl who looked like Beyda.

"I just want to find her," said Beyda's mother, Zakiya Abd, her eyes swollen with grief. "Whether she's alive or dead, I just want to find her."

Some police in Baghdad concede that at this point, there is little they can do to help. Their precinct houses were thoroughly looted after the war. Despite promises from the American authorities, Baghdad police still lack uniforms, weapons, communications and computer equipment and patrol cars.

"We used to patrol all the time before the war," said a senior officer at the Aadimiya precinct house. "Now, nothing, and the criminals realize there is no security on the streets."

The Human Rights Watch report alleges that sometimes when women try to report a rape or families ask for help in finding abducted women, they are turned away by Iraqi police officers indifferent to the crimes. Some law-enforcement officials insist abduction and rape have not increased, while other officials and many medical personnel disagree.

Bernard B. Kerik, a former New York City police commissioner and now an adviser to the Interior Ministry, told of recently firing a precinct chief when he learned that the official had failed to pursue a family's report of their missing 16-year-old daughter. "The biggest part of the issue is a culture that precludes people from reporting," Mr. Kerik said. "It encourages people not to report."

If an Iraqi woman wants to report a rape, she has to travel a bureaucratic odyssey. She first has to go to the police for documents that permit her to get a forensic test. That test is performed only at the city morgue. The police take a picture of the victim and stamp it, and then stamp her arm.

"That is so no one else goes in her place and says that she was raped, that she lost her virginity," said Ms. Hussein, the nurse.

At the morgue, a committee of three male doctors performs a gynecological examination on the victim to determine if there was sexual abuse. The doctors are available only from 8:30 a.m. to 1:30 p.m. If a victim arrives at any other time, she has to return the next day, without washing away any physical evidence. Hospitals can check victims only for broader trauma, like contusions and broken bones.

Dr. Younis said she had seen more rape cases in the months after the war than before. Yet even when women come to the hospital with injuries that are consistent with rape, they often insist something else happened. A 60-year-old woman asserted that she had been hit by a car. The mother of a 6-year-old girl begged the doctor to write a report saying that her daughter's hymen had been ruptured because she fell on a sharp object, a common lie families tell in the case of rape, Dr. Younis said.

Shame and fear compel the lies, Dr. Younis said. "A woman's father or brother, they feel it is their duty to kill her" if she has been raped, Dr. Younis said. "It is the tribal law. They will get only six months in prison and then they are out."

Sanariya's family took her to a doctor three days after her attack only because the bleeding had not stopped. She had been sitting on the stairs at about 4 p.m. on May 22 when an armed man dragged her into an abandoned building next door. He shot at neighbors who tried to help the girl. He fled when she began screaming during the assault.

Her mother refuses to let her outside now to play. Fatin lied to her family and said an operation had been done to restore Sanariya's hymen. But when her eldest brother, Ahmed, found out otherwise, he wanted to kill Sanariya, Fatin said.

Out of earshot of her family, Sanariya said she feels no better now, two months after the attack. "I don't sleep at night," she said in the hallway. "I don't sleep."