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Los Angeles Times
 January 8, 2004
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Iraqis Are Bitter Over U.S.-Held Prisoners

Coalition prepares to free 506 men as anger grows. Many detainees have yet to be charged.

By Jeffrey Fleishman, Times Staff Writer

ABU GHRAIB, Iraq — Visitors hold scraps of paper bearing identification numbers as they pass coils of razor wire and walk across a muddy field toward the prison, where sons, husbands, cousins and other suspected insurgents have been held for months by U.S. forces.

Fathers fidget with prayer beads and curse the soldiers who snatched their boys. Mothers pull their *abayas* tight against the wind, checking lists of names posted on plywood. Imams come with Korans. Those who can afford to, bring lawyers. Brothers carry food and plastic bags of clothing and wait amid the roar of Humvees.

Iraqis resent many things about the U.S. occupation, but the detention of roughly 13,000 prisoners — most of whom have not been formally charged — has triggered intense disgust. The U.S. contends that the detainees have links to the Saddam Hussein loyalists and insurgents attacking coalition forces. Families say many prisoners are innocent and were unjustly handcuffed, blindfolded and led from their villages in humiliation.

"We got rid of Saddam, and the Americans told us we'd enjoy liberty," said Basim Mohammed Rashid as he waited here at Abu Ghraib prison on the outskirts of Baghdad to visit his brother Yasser. "But this is not liberty. If my brother has committed a crime, then we can get a lawyer. But we know nothing about my brother's case.... This is not democracy, no matter what the Americans claim."

The U.S. will attempt to ease such anger this week as it begins releasing 506 detainees, including 28 juveniles, in a new program to free nonviolent suspects and generate goodwill among the public. The move comes after months of criticism from religious leaders and human rights groups over the treatment and length of prisoners' stays in coalition custody. The move also reflects the complex legal and emotional terrain the U.S. faces in battling an insurgency while trying not to lose credibility with the Iraqi people.

For many families waiting beneath the guardhouse towers here, that credibility has long vanished. The disenchantment was visible on the face of a woman who held a crumpled paper listing the names of her three sons. She had not seen them since their arrest July 29, and was told Wednesday that she had mixed up visitation days and would not be allowed in the prison. She held up the paper and walked away.

Others stepped into the line.

Unkept Promises

"We keep receiving promises that they'll be released, but they never are," said Abu Adnan, whose two

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brothers, one a former army officer, the other a merchant, were seized in Mosul in July. "The Americans lie to us. They raid our houses. They confiscate our money. Why are they not sending these detainees to court? Is this logical? These men are human beings with children and families."

Many in Abu Ghraib prison are suspected of being guerrillas or of collaborating with the insurgents who have killed hundreds of Iraqis and coalition troops. U.S. officials say each detainee's case is periodically reviewed and that prisoners are held in accordance with the rules of the Geneva Convention governing occupied territories.

Most suspects are held for 72 hours after arrest, they say; those deemed nonthreatening are released, but those considered security risks may be held for an unspecified length of time.

Concern over the fate of prisoners has intensified in recent months as U.S. forces have conducted raids throughout Iraq and locked up hundreds of suspects in a string of detention camps. These more aggressive tactics and Hussein's arrest in December, according to coalition officials, are weakening the guerrilla movement. Troops have been focusing most intensely on the so-called Sunni Triangle north and west of Baghdad, an area that is home to many of the detainees.

Scores of people from this region travel the highway to Abu Ghraib each day to visit relatives. The prison of beige walls and low buildings housed hundreds of criminals and political prisoners during Hussein's rule. It was the nation's largest and most notorious prison, a place known for its deplorable living conditions, overcrowding, torture and executions.

Now, after a dramatic shift in power and politics, the prison is filled with suspected enemies of the coalition. It stands, for many Iraqis, as an emblem of past — and continuing — injustice.

Mahmoud Shukur Mahmoud is inmate No. 151064.

His father, Shukur, arrived at the prison Wednesday with a folded paper from the Red Cross. It said his son was captured by U.S. forces on Sept. 25. Mahmoud had written a letter on the back: "I am in good health in this camp with brothers and relatives. My regards to Mother and Grandmother. We are good in general. The people with us are good people. All of them are suspected by mistake. We are waiting to be released with God's will. I miss you."

Searching for Answers

Wearing a kaffiyeh and a blue jacket, Shukur stood with other fathers around a plywood shelter. None had heard that the coalition planned to release hundreds of prisoners in coming days. They read posted regulations forbidding visitors from bringing cigarettes, pencils and medication.

Tribal leaders gathered and searched for names of missing family members. Some accused the U.S. soldiers of stealing tens of thousands of dollars from their homes — apparently not understanding that they were given receipts for money confiscated during raids.

Shukur listened. He said he didn't understand what had brought him to these prison walls.

He said Mahmoud and his friends were in a minibus heading to a picnic when U.S. soldiers stopped them in Mosul about 7 a.m. There had been an explosion hours earlier and the streets were tense.

Shukur said his son and six others, including the minibus driver, an engineering student, were arrested.

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"They were going on a picnic," Shukur said. "Now I'd like to know what's going on. We went to many lawyers, but they tell us they can do nothing because the Americans have them. I came to see my son today. I wasn't allowed in. We didn't expect this of the Americans, but now we're expecting far worse."

Mohammed Hussein checked the lists in the plywood shelter and then the number in his hand. He was at the right place. His brother, a shopkeeper from Balad whose name he would not give, was inside.

"I have my brother's identification number now," Hussein said. "I hope they will let me see him. What can I say? I'm sure that more than half the people inside have done nothing. It's the informants. They're using personal vendettas to make up fictitious charges."

Wafa Salman Majeed waited near Hussein in the mud. Her sons — Atheer, Lahib and Umar — were sleeping in their home in Diala in August when soldiers entered the house at 4 a.m. and handcuffed them. Their father was a Baath Party official who has since vanished. Majeed said her sons were not politically active and had no ties to insurgents. "Why can't they release at least one of my sons?" she said. "They were polite boys, and now all the village feels sad."

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