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**UN ENVOY CONDEMNS USE OF HUNTING RIFLES AGAINST IRAQI PROTESTERS**

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Asharq Al-Awsat (17 February 2020)

The top United Nations envoy to Iraq condemned on Monday the use of hunting rifles firing birdshot against peaceful protesters in Baghdad and urged the government to ensure they are not harmed.

Iraq faces an extraordinary domestic crisis as nearly 500 people have died in months of protests demanding the ouster of what demonstrators see as a corrupt ruling elite and an end to foreign interference mainly by Iran and the United States.

The United Nations Assistance Mission for Iraq said it had received credible allegations of protesters being targeted with hunting rifles, stones and firebombs on the nights of Feb. 14-16, leading to at least 50 injuries.

At least 150 people were injured in the city of Karbala in January alone due to similar tactics, UNAMI said in a statement, according to Reuters.

The continued pattern of the use of excessive force, with ambiguously identified armed groups and unclear loyalties, is a grave security concern that must be tackled urgently and decisively. Peaceful protesters should be protected at all times, said Jeanine Hennis-Plasschaert, Special Representative of the United Nations Secretary-General for Iraq.

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