Iraqi youth stoned for Western 'emo' style

By Ahmed Rasheed and Mohammed Ameer, REUTERS (March 10, 2012)

At least 14 youths have been stoned to death in Baghdad in the past three weeks in what appears to be a campaign by Shi’ite militants against youths wearing Western-style “emo” clothes and haircuts, security and hospital sources say.

Militants in Shi’ite neighbourhoods where the stonings have taken place circulated lists on Saturday naming more youths targeted to be killed if they do not change the way they dress. The killings have taken place since Iraq’s interior ministry drew attention to the “emo” subculture last month, labeling it “Satanism” and ordering a community police force to stamp it out.

“Emo” is a form of punk music developed in the United States. Fans are known for their distinctive dress, often including tight jeans, T-shirts with logos and distinctive long or spiky haircuts.

At least 14 bodies of youths have been brought to three hospitals in eastern Baghdad bearing signs of having been beaten to death with rocks or bricks, security and hospital sources told Reuters under condition they not be identified because they were not authorised to speak to the media.

Nine bodies were brought to hospitals in Sadr City, a vast, poor Shi’ite neighourhood, three were brought to East Baghdad’s main al-Kindi hospital and two were brought to the central morgue, medical sources said. Six other young people, including two girls, were wounded in beatings intended as warnings, the security sources said.

“Last week I signed the death certificates of three of those young people, and the reason for death I wrote in my own hand was severe skull fractures,” a doctor at al-Kindi hospital told Reuters. “A very powerful blow to the head caused these fractures which totally smashed the skull of the victim.”

A leaflet distributed in the Shi’ite Bayaa district of east Baghdad seen by Reuters on Saturday had 24 names of youths targeted for killing. “We strongly warn you, to all the obscene males and females, if you will not leave this filthy work within four days the punishment of God will descend upon you at the hand of the Mujahideen,” the leaflet said.

Another leaflet in Sadr City bore 20 names. “We are the Brigades of Anger. We warn you, if you do not get back to sanity and the right path, you will be killed,” it said.

In a statement last month the interior ministry said it was monitoring “the ’emo’ phenomenon, or Satanism” which it said was spreading through schools, particularly among teenage girls. “They wear tight clothes that bear paintings of skulls, they use school implements with skulls and wear rings in their noses and tongues as well as other weird appearances,” it said.

After reports of the stonings circulated on Iraqi media, the interior ministry said this week that no murders on its files could be blamed on the reaction to “emo”.

“Many media have reported fabricated news reports about the so-called ’emo’ phenomenon - stories about tens of young people killed in various ways, including stoning,” the ministry said in a statement on Thursday. “No murder case has been recorded with the interior ministry on so-called ’emo’ grounds. All cases of murder recorded were for revenge, social and common criminal reasons.”

CLERICS DENOUNCE KILLINGS

Iraq’s leading Shi’ite clerics have condemned the stonings. Abdul-Raheem al-Rikabi, Baghdad representative for Iraq’s most influential Shi’ite cleric, Ali al-Sistani, called the killings “terrorist attacks”. “Such a phenonomenon which has spread among young people should be tackled through dialogue and peaceful means and not through physical liquidation,” Rikabi told Reuters.

In a response to questions on his website on Saturday, Moqtada al-Sadr, a Shi’ite cleric whose followers dominate Sadr City, described “emo” youths as “crazy and fools”, but said they should be dealt with only through the law.

“They are a plague on Muslim society, and those responsible should eliminate them through legal means,” he said.

Abu Ali al-Rubaie, a leading Sadr aide in Sadr City, said the cleric’s followers had nothing to do with the killings. “In this issue and in all such problems we always use peaceful and educational methods to correct any wrongdoings. We are not connected in any way to those groups allegedly responsibility for killing those young people.”

In the years after the fall of Saddam Hussein, most of Baghdad’s neighbourhoods were under the firm grip of Sunni and Shi’ite religious militias which enforced strict dress codes. Today, the militias have largely disappeared, Baghdad is far more peaceful and many youths experiment with Western styles, although much of Iraqi society remains conservative.

On the streets of Baghdad, people said they had heard of the killings through the media. Many expressed disapproval of the “emo” style, but said murder was no way to respond.

“I saw them a couple weeks ago ... a bunch of girls, high-school aged, walking together, dressed in black. They had long black eye makeup and bracelets with skulls and chains on their handbags with skulls,” said Abdullah, 31.

“If they are close friends who have something in common, that’s all right. If other things we hear about them are true, like sucking each other’s blood or worshipping the devil, that is not accepted in our society. But I think this is just a trend to imitate the West.”