From Inside Iraq, a Plea for U.S. Action

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Articles & Testimony

As the debate intensifies over U.S. policy toward Iraq, I keep thinking about a conversation I had last spring over dinner with a surgeon I'd met while visiting a hospital in Northern Iraq. "We have real problems with the United States," he said. "The American government always interferes in the Middle East. But it doesn't interfere enough in Iraq."

As the rest of the world dithers about whether President George W. Bush overstepped bounds in declaring Iraq to be part of an "Axis of Evil," Kurds in the so-called "safe haven" of Northern Iraq have few doubts. During nine months of teaching history there last year, I met hundreds of Iraqi Kurds. I played pick-up soccer with pharmacists and mechanics, hiked in the mountains with lawyers and soldiers and lost at PlayStation auto racing to accountants and local journalists. Almost to a person, those I met would welcome help in ridding their country of Saddam Hussein.

I crossed the border into Iraq illegally in September 2000. Under Hussein, visiting scholars from the United States are unwelcome. But, I had an invitation from the Kurdish parties governing the safe haven to lecture in Iranian history in the region's three universities. The opportunity to both teach and learn was irresistible. I stayed until June. For six weeks, I shared a house with an Arab medical school professor from Baghdad University. He was fed up with the corruption in Baghdad and had told his colleagues he was going to Jordan. Instead, he came to the safe haven, a region about the size of New Jersey in which Iraqis can live free of persecution and outside Hussein's control. Many Iraqis come to the safe-haven to shop and, if they can, stay and work. Even though the safe-haven is under the same sanctions as the rest of the country, the economy is much better than in Hussein's Iraq. People are relatively free to speak their minds there.

Back in Baghdad, the professor said, he had been required to participate in "spontaneous" demonstrations. On the morning of a rally, buses would line up in front of the university, and the dean would order him to get his students on board. Students who refused were expelled or worse. Those who demonstrated got free meals, and those who managed to get interviewed by the Western press were rewarded with money, assuming they said things in support of the regime.

Iraqis in the safe haven readily describe the fear under which they once lived. Several pointed out to me the former security prison in Sulaimaniya where their friends and relatives had been executed by Baath Party secret police. Such prisons still exist in other parts of the country.

Many of my students described living through the Anfal campaign, a 10-month orgy of violence in 1987 and 1988 when Saddam Hussein razed 4,000 of Northern Iraq's 4,655 villages and killed as many as 180,000 of his own citizens. Several students I came to know had lived through Hussein's intense chemical weapons bombardment of the eastern Iraqi town of Halabja that killed 5,000 civilians. My students told of seeing their parents or siblings slowly choke to death. One veiled sophomore told me that her respiratory infections have been almost constant since she first inhaled "the almond smelling gas" at Halabja. Another student, raised by an uncle after his family was killed by the chemicals, told me he still meets his three brothers and two sisters in his dreams. Farmers in Halabja complain that people still hesitate to buy their peanuts, chickpeas and melons because they think that eating Halabja

produce will cause in their children the kind of birth defects common there in the years following the bombardment.

The chemical attack on Halabja was not a unique event. One priest in a Christian village outside Amadya told me about seeing an Iraqi plane in 1988 circle low over the cultivated fields and drop chemical weapons that sent a "white smoke" blowing over a number of houses. The priest loaded up people who'd been exposed to the gas into his pickup truck and drove them to a hospital four miles away. Only half of them survived the trip.

I made a point of stopping unannounced at hospitals around Northern Iraq. In Halabja, doctors described sharp increases in infertility, lung fibrosis and birth defects after the attacks. Specialists also report skyrocketing rates of rare cancers, especially those of the digestive and intestinal tracks. One doctor told me that in the village of Khalilhama, which has a population of only a couple hundred, he knew of six cases of colon cancer diagnosed in one year. All the victims were in their twenties.

While the safe haven is freer than most of Iraq, it does not have the resources to treat or even properly study its victims of chemical warfare. Under terms of a 1996 United Nations agreement, Hussein controls the activities of U.N. agencies operating within Iraq's borders. Baghdad determines, for example, how humanitarian aid is spent, and it is a sad fact that Baghdad often refuses to order medicines that could save lives. When it does, it often directs contracts to its political allies like Malaysia rather than ordering high-quality pharmaceuticals from countries like Sweden. The U.N. also relies on Baghdad to issue visas to U.N. workers. Currently Iraq is preventing 280 U.N. officials from entering its borders.

Preventive medical treatment is further complicated by the fact that Baghdad has yet to allow relevant U.N. agencies or nongovernmental organizations to engage in systematic testing to determine exactly what substances civilians were exposed to (forensic evidence indicates that the Iraqi government used not only mustard and nerve agents, but also a wide variety of biological and radiological weapons).

If medicines are in short supply, food is not -- despite suggestions that the embargo has led to massive shortages. Under terms of the "oil for food" program, every Iraqi man, woman, and child receives 2,472 calories per day. The U.N.'s World Health Organization and the Food and Agriculture Organization found in a September 2000 report that the leading cause of adult mortality in Iraq is hypertension and diabetes, neither a disease associated with hunger. The mission found half of all Iraqis to be overweight. Many activists cite a 1999 UNICEF report claiming that 500,000 children died because of sanctions, but fail to mention the report's co-author was the Iraqi Ministry of Health, which provided many of the statistics.

Some State Department diplomats and CIA officials, as well as many Arab governments, continue to counsel against overthrowing Saddam, voicing concerns over what comes next -- the so-called fear of the alternative. For Iraqis -- those in the safe haven at least -- the bigger fear is of the here and now. ❖

Los Angeles Times

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