Banasiaw Dispatch

Jul 23, 2001

Articles & Testimony

When Americans think ethnic cleansing, they think of Bosnia, Kosovo, Rwanda. They don't think of Iraq. But that's because most Americans don't go to places like Banasiaw, a checkpoint along the border between the U.S.-patrolled safe haven in northern Iraq and Saddam Hussein's distinctly unsafe terrain to the south. In Banasiaw, the ethnically cleansed-Iraqi Kurds, Turkmans, and other non-Arabs forced from their homes by Saddam's men-constitute a brisk traffic. We had two expelled families arrive just today, says a Kurdish commander named Jamal. Two families today. Another four tomorrow. They've been coming for years. According to the U.S. Committee on Refugees, the number of internally displaced persons in northern Iraq increased from around 640,000 in 1994 to almost one million in 1999. And thousands more are expelled every year.

Saddam's ethnic cleansing isn't new. In fact, he was once famous for it. In 1988, during the Iran-Iraq War, Saddam's forces carried out the infamous Anfal Campaign-razing some 5,000 villages in northern Iraq, relocating populations into well-guarded collective towns, and using chemical weapons against those who did not move fast enough. By the end of the year, approximately 182,000 non-Arabs had been massacred. But, over time, Saddam has grown more savvy about public relations. Today, by carefully controlling press access, he keeps his ethnic cleansing from international view. Indeed, to listen to many in the United States and Europe, you'd think the main cause of suffering in Iraq today is not Saddam, but the U.S.-led sanctions campaign against him. In the swelling towns of northern Iraq, however, they know better. Abdullah, 44, a married father of six, tells a typical story. He was an elementary school teacher in the oil-rich city of Kirkuk, a veteran of the eight-year Iran-Iraq War, and a conscript in the Iraqi occupation of Kuwait. One day last spring, several policemen and an official from Saddam's ruling Baath Party (which foments racism against Kurds and other non-Arabs) pushed their way into his house without warning. They confiscated the family's U.N. oil-for-food-program ration cards, then ordered Abdullah and his elderly parents to accompany them to the security headquarters "for five minutes," while his wife and six children waited at home.

When Iraqi security finally released him-not five minutes but one week later-they told Abdullah that his parents would remain in jail until the entire family agreed to abandon their home and property. Abdullah relented. Three weeks later, the family left, having lost their house and two cars, not to mention the quarter-million Iraqi dinar bribe they paid police in order to get back their U.N. ration cards (so they could get food when they arrived in the northern Kurdish safehaven). Abdullah said his expulsion was due to "Saddam's oil strategy. He does not want any Kurds in areas of oil wealth." The Iraqi dictator, it seems, suspects Kurds and Turkmans of disloyalty and feels his country's precious oil reserves would be safer surrounded by ethnic Arabs. The expulsions have grown so frequent, Abdullah added, that "there is no Kurdish family in Kirkuk who is not waiting for the knock on their door."

Many Kurds have no choice but to wait. According to several refugees in Bardiqariman, a tent city in the safe haven that held 1,660 people the day I visited, the Iraqi government no longer allows Kurds to hold good jobs unless they reregister their ethnicity as Arab. Some Kurds try to do just that, but it often doesn't work. Saddam's henchmen still cleanse them from oil-rich areas, but, in an ironic nod to their assumed identity, many are banished not to the Kurdish north but to non-oil-producing areas in the Arab south. I asked one family in the northern town of Kalar how they got there. After I pointed out a few discrepancies in their accounts, they admitted, embarrassed, that they had

tried to change their identity to Arab but were expelled anyway. Torture isn't widespread, but it isn't exactly unheard of either. Qasim, 57, told me how security police snatched him and his family from their house in Khanaqin, then savagely beat him in jail while his wife and daughters sat in the adjacent cell. After one particularly harsh beating, Qasim's daughter Bisma explained, blood oozed from her father's ears; he has been deaf ever since. Other families tell similar stories. Seventy-three-year-old Nadeema cares for her son, who suffers from brain damage_the result of a severe beating by Iraqi officers in 1994 during a round-up of young Kurdish men. Despite her family's subsequent expulsion to Sulaymaniyah in the north, she considers herself lucky, explaining, "Most families in Khanaqin never saw their sons again."

And the abuse can also be more subtle. Ruhnak, a 37-year-old woman, told me that Iraqi security officers arrested her and demanded she divorce her husband, whom they accused of working against the government. When she refused, they expelled her four children from school and told her they would stop her U.N. oil-for-food rations if she did not leave Khanaqin. She now lives in the city of Kalar across the border in the safe haven.

According to Zahir Shukur Bapir, head of the governing Patriotic Union of Kurdistan's Displaced Persons Bureau in Darbandikhan, the capital of the Kurdish-controlled section of the Kirkuk governorate, "Every governorate [under Saddam's control] has an Office of Peoples' Issues from where they order expulsions." An emerging paper trail backs up his claim. In one two-year-old document, recently smuggled into the safe-haven, one of Saddam's governors issued detailed expulsion instructions, attaching a list of 1,380 people to be expelled over the course of three months. Separately, the September 19, 2000, edition of the official Iraqi newspaper Sawt al-Ta'amim (Voice of Nationalization) reported the distribution of 10,000 plots of confiscated land to members of the Iraqi military and security forces. Saddam's government quickly pulled the paper from newsstands, but dissidents had already sent a few copies to the north.

Life for the Kurds expelled to tent cities in northern Iraq is bleak: Temperatures exceed 100 degrees during the summer, then fall below freezing in the winter. Drinking water is scarce. Most displaced persons say they want to return home but cannot do so while Saddam remains in power. Most of the refugees think Saddam views the Bush administration's ongoing effort to soften the sanctions regime as a sign of weakness. And, as they know all too well, Saddam usually responds to weakness with aggression. Asked about returning home, Muna, a recent arrival from Khanaqin, referred to Saddam's legendary chemical weapons attack in 1988: "We are too afraid of another Anfal," she said. Perhaps the Bush administration should be as well. ❖

New Republic

ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

How to Make Russia Pay in Ukraine: Study Syria

Feb 15, 2022

◆

Anna Borshchevskaya

(/policy-analysis/how-make-russia-pay-ukraine-study-syria)

BRIEF ANALYSIS

Bennett's Bahrain Visit Further Invigorates Israel-Gulf Diplomacy

Feb 14, 2022

◆

Simon Henderson

(/policy-analysis/bennetts-bahrain-visit-further-invigorates-israel-gulf-diplomacy)

REGIONS & COUNTRIES

Iraq (/policy-analysis/iraq)