

Post 11 September jitters for Iraqi Kurds

by Maggy Zanger

Since the Gulf war, Iraq has been effectively divided in two. Two Kurdish administrations control an area the size of Switzerland. Despite constant interference from the regime in Baghdad and from Iran and Turkey (fearful that the example in Iraq will embolden their own large Kurdish populations), Iraqi Kurds today enjoy unprecedented social and political freedom and a fairly stable economy. UN Resolution 986, the oil-for-food programme, has pumped some \$3 billion into the Kurdish enclaves, providing not only food but also funding for projects in agriculture, education, health, de-mining and housing.

As talk increases of making Iraq the target of 'phase two' of the 'war on terrorism', Kurds, together with members of other non-Arab minorities resident in the Kurdish enclaves, experience both hope and fear. While they desperately hope that a US-led attack may result in a regime change in Baghdad, they also fear Saddam Hussein's reaction to any military action. Recent press reports indicate that Baghdad has installed infantry brigades, artillery units, tanks, anti-aircraft guns and missiles along the ceasefire line which is only a few kilometres from the main population centres in the enclaves. There is no guarantee that the US or any other power can protect those in the Kurdish area, or, indeed, that they will choose to, if their attention is solely focused on the 'war on terror'. If there is another mass exodus of Iraqi Kurds it is likely that both Turkey and Iran will try to use the rhetoric of the global war on terror to refuse entry in order to 'protect' themselves from 'terrorism'. It should be noted, however, that the Iraqi Kurds have a remarkable history of not using terrorist tactics.

Almost all Kurds (and for that matter Assyrians, Turkomans, Chaldeans, Armenians and Yezidis) over the age of ten have been refugees or IDPs at some point in their life. According to

UN Habitat, 23% of the population of the Kurdish area are victims of displacement as a result of genocide, ethnic cleansing and conflict in recent decades.

In the waning days of the Iran-Iraq war in the late 1980s, the *Anfal* ('spoils' in Arabic) campaign by the Iraqi government included mass killing, displacement and disappearance. As many as 4,500 Kurdish villages were destroyed and 500,000 people were forced to collective towns. Chemical weapons were used in at least 40 separate attacks. Some 50,000 to 200,000 people were killed and another 182,000 disappeared and are presumed dead. The large numbers of 'anfal widows' - many denied the solace of confirmation that their husbands are dead - give the collective towns of northern Iraq today one of the most gender-unbalanced populations in the world.

'Arabisation' of the oil-rich region around the main Kurdish city of Kirkuk (which remained in Iraqi government hands at the end of the Gulf War) began in the early 1960s when the Baath party first came to power. Ethnic cleansing and government-controlled in-movement of Arabs from central and southern Iraq have dramatically altered the demographic composition of the region.

Since 1991 the Arabisation campaign has been reinvigorated. While the UN Committee for Refugees states that 100,000 people have been expelled since the Gulf War, Kurdish sources speak of 200,000. Kurds, Turkmen and Assyrians are pressured to sign a form 'correcting' their nationality. Any non-Arab who needs to have any official dealings with the Iraqi government - whether to do with ration cards, property, vehicle ownership or school registration - has to fill in a form that says: "I wish to correct my ethnic origin into Arabic". Those who comply may then be told that since they are 'Arab' they should move to the south of Iraq. Those who

refuse are subjected to intimidation, arrest and, eventually, expulsion to one of the Kurdish enclaves. In recent months, as attention has focused on Afghanistan, there are reports that the rate of ethnic cleansing in the city and governorate of Kirkuk has speeded up. A 'law' decreed by the Baathist Revolutionary Council in September 2001 allows for the nationality of all non-Arab Iraqis to be 'corrected'. Confiscated residential and agricultural land belonging to non-Arab citizens is given to officers of the military and security forces. Arab settlers are given land, cash and weapons as 'personal gifts' from Saddam Hussein.

In the Kurdish autonomous areas, officials and UN and NGO workers struggle to accommodate the steady stream of expellees. The lucky ones can join families who had been forced from the Kirkuk area in earlier waves of expulsion. Other crowd into the collective towns and makeshift camps nearby.

Uncertainty drives all inhabitants of the Kurdish enclaves, whether resident or IDP, to seek opportunities to migrate. For many, voluntary departure now is preferable to future expulsion by Saddam. Well-founded fears and traumatic memories impel Kurds to risk astronomical amounts of money (up to \$10,000 per person) to embark on perilous journeys through Syria, Turkey and Iran and to crowd onto derelict ships bound for Italy or Australia. The threat of a US attack - and the Iraqi regime's possible response to it - has made that uncertainty all the greater.

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For further information on internal displacement in Iraq, see the Iraq country report of the Global IDP Project at: www.db.idpproject.org/Sites/IdpProjectDb/idp_Survey.nsf/wCountries/Iraq