

## IRAQ; Exorcising the Ghosts of a Nation

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At the confluence of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, where civilization began, men fish from small boats and boys swim in polluted brown waters. When Saddam Hussein was in power, the story goes, there were no fish in the river. It is said Hussein put something in the water to poison them because he did not like the predominantly Shiite people of Basra.

On one of the river banks is the home of Ali Hassan Majid, known as "Chemical Ali," the king of spades in the Defense Intelligence Agency's most-wanted deck of cards. In the days of Hussein, the ace of spades, and Chemical Ali, people say the boys would have been shot had they swum so near this house.

People here also say that if someone's car broke down in front of the security headquarters or in front of Hussein's palace, he too would have been shot. Hussein reportedly had visited his palace in Basra only twice since 1980, yet in that palace, as in all his estimated 70 others in Iraq, it is said cooks used to prepare meals for him and his entourage twice a day in case he showed up -- hundreds of meals no one else was allowed to eat.

Although Hussein seldom appeared in Basra, the fear of him abides. Throughout Iraq, this fear is distilled into stories and myths that may or may not be true but are made more vivid because Iraqis have been cut off from the outside world for two decades. Satellite TV, satellite phones, the Internet -- all were all forbidden under Hussein. One story has it that 14 people were executed simply because they were found with satellite phones.

Omar, a driver and translator in Baghdad, said he was imprisoned for having a satellite dish. He was kept, with 27 others, for six months in a cell measuring 6 1/2 by 10 feet. "But I didn't have a satellite dish," he protested. "Finally, I was fined [thousands of dollars] and told I must turn in my satellite dish. 'I don't have a satellite dish,' I told them again, and they put me back in prison. Then my mother got a cousin to go out and buy a satellite dish on the black market, and I turned it in. 'See, we knew you had a satellite dish,' they said."

Stories like Omar's are now being told and retold all over the country as Iraqis disgorge the history they have had to repress. The worst of this history is literally being dug up. Peter Bouckaert, a senior researcher for Human Rights Watch, is helping to document the mass graves. The organization recently released a report on graves near al-Mahawil military base, one behind an abandoned brick factory and another in an open field, where more than 2,000 people were executed and buried by the Iraqi government in the aftermath of the Shiite uprising in the south in 1991.

"The graves were not difficult to find," Bouckaert said. "I went into villages, and the shepherds and other villagers and farmers knew where the graves were and took me there. I would estimate there are as many as 300,000 people in mass graves all over Iraq. But we need help on forensics to protect the evidence crucial to future trials of the people responsible.... [The sites] are important not only for evidence but also for the Iraqis who want to identify and finally bury their relatives."

Bouckaert tells of one gravedigger in Baghdad who gave him a list of 1,000 people he had buried. "The Mukhabarat [secret police] dropped off the bodies at his office. He kept a secret notebook of the people with their identification bands and the location of where he had buried them. The cause of death was listed as 'trauma due to execution.'"

This reminder of Hussein's wrath, along with the belief among Iraqis that he is still alive and that his security forces and the Fedayeen militia did and continue to do much of the looting, haunts people and undermines their confidence in the future.

"It is hard to trust. We don't know who is still working for Saddam," said Abdul, an accountant who registers internally displaced people for a humanitarian aid agency. "So we try to protect ourselves through our tribes. We have watches at night. I am assigned one hour with four other people. We carry guns and protect 16 buildings where other people from our tribe live."

Before peace can settle on Iraq, the ghosts of the past need to be laid to rest. The stories need to be told, the facts documented, the atrocities recorded and justice administered.

Last week, Sergio Vieira de Mello, the U.N. high commissioner for human rights, convened in Baghdad the first Iraqi workshop on human rights. The workshop included 60 participants, the majority of them Iraqi human rights activists, lawyers and judges from around the country, as well as 10 international experts, to decide how best to address the horrors of the past. At the conclusion, the group was asked to take this discussion into the community.

The good news from Iraq is the emergence of local human rights organizations and new newspapers, although many are in need of technical assistance. The bad news is the continuing lack of working communications systems, which has made it difficult for Iraqis to have a national dialogue. Iraq remains sealed off. As the country struggles to settle its past and lay the foundation for its future, it needs working telephones and wider access to the Internet, as well as television and radio. A system of justice must be established to hold accountable the guilty.

But the most urgent need is that Hussein be found, for it is said that he is playing with his own deck of cards.

Credit: Joanne Leedom-Ackerman, who serves on the boards of the International Crisis Group and Human Rights Watch, recently returned from a trip to Iraq with Save the Children.

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