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CIVIL WAR IN IRAQ

A STAFF REPORT

TO THE

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Proposed expanded safe haven (see p. 12).

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An Iraqi Kurd finding refuge in the mountains, March 31, 1991.

B. The Kurdish Rebellion

Long suppressed by Sunni Arab regimes in Baghdad, Iraq's Kurds have almost invariably seized on weakness in the center as an opportunity for rebellion in the mountainous Kurdish areas of northern and eastern Iraq. Thus the Kurds took advantage of revolutionary confusion in Iraq in the 1960's and 1970's to rebel (a rebellion crushed after a U.S.-approved Iraq-Iran deal led to the cutoff of CIA assistance in 1975) and of the Iran-Iraq war to rebel in the 1980's. This time, however, the Kurdish leadership was more cautious.

The 1980's rebellion had been crushed with incredible ferocity. Beginning in 1985, the Iraqi regime had engaged in an accelerated program of destroying all the villages of Kurdistan. In March 1988 the regime used poison gas on the city of Halabja, and then in August launched a broad chemical weapons attack on more than 70 villages along the Iraq-Turkey and Iraq-Iran borders. With that rebellion taking the lives of more than 100,000 Kurds and costing another 2 million of their homes, the Kurdish leadership was reluctant to proceed without an assurance of success. To many in the Kurdish leadership the calls made by President Bush for the Iraqi people to overthrow Saddam Hussein and, in particular, the promise to shoot down Iraqi aircraft ("You fly, you die") provided such an assurance.

The spearhead of the Kurdish rebellion was not, however, the longtime leadership of the anti-Saddam Kurdish political parties. As in the south, there was a spontaneous popular uprising followed by the near simultaneous defection of some 300 officers of an all-Kurdish territorial military force. The defection of these officers and their units, locally known as the "jash" (or "mules") and long on the payroll of the Baghdad regime, effectively brought all the

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overloaded. Dump-trucks carried loads of 50 or more; private cars were filled and even carried adults and children in the trunks.

Not all the refugees were Kurds. Living among the Kurds in the north were more than 500,000 Christian Assyrians and Chaldeans. In Dihok, on Easter Sunday, Yacoub Yousif, an Assyrian leader, was eager to take his American visitor to the midnight service in an ancient Assyrian church, the first such service there since the Ba'ath regime had closed it years before. Heavy shelling of the city forced the priest to postpone the midnight mass to 2 a.m. and then, as the shelling continued unabated, to postpone it to Easter morning.

Easter morning the last of the Dihok residents were moving out and the Easter service was not held. And a day which Kurds, Assyrians, and Chaldeans hoped might be part of their national resurrection instead marked the beginning of a new chapter of suffering and death.

The Kurdish leader Jalal Talabani (center) with Yacoub Yousif (left), Dihok, March 30, 1991.

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II. THE HUMANITARIAN CRISIS IN THE NORTH

A. March 30–31, 1991

As the Easter weekend concluded, it was clear an immense catastrophe was about to overtake the Kurdish people. People walking to the mountains carried little food and not much with which to shelter themselves; adults shepherding children or assisting the elderly were able to bring even less. Those with cars and trucks were better off as they could carry more and arrived in the mountains less exhausted. However, even before the Kurds left their cities, little food was available. Typically a family group of 10 finding refuge in the high mountains on the Iraqi side of the border arrived on Easter Sunday with 100 pounds of rice and perhaps some other more perishable foodstuffs. It would be another 3 weeks before any significant international relief reached these people, and the Easter Sunday arrivals were the lucky refugees: they had come by truck or car.

Ultimately, some 800,000 Kurds actually reached the Turkish border while up to 1,500,000 are in Iran or along the Iranian border. The television images of these refugees—desperate people living in filth, fighting for food, and burying their babies—have shocked governments into action. Yet they only represent part of the catastrophe.

Refugees in flight from Dihok, March 31, 1991.

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A Kurdish village destroyed by the Saddam Hussein regime.

Together with the villages, the Iraqi regime killed sheep and farm animals, and burned orchards. A particular target were the donkeys and few of these once ubiquitous beasts of burden can now be found in Iraqi Kurdistan. The donkey, like the village, was a key support system for the Peshmerga.

By destroying rural Kurdistan, the Iraqi regime also deprived the inhabitants of this pastoral land of any indigenous food supply. As a result, the Kurds have become entirely dependent on imported food, and in particular, U.S. rice and wheat. With the U.N. sanctions, the American war, and the civil war, these imported supplies disappeared. Kurds fleeing the cities at the end of March could find no food in the countryside and no village shelter in a still freezing mountain environment. The absence of indigenous food and shelter has greatly exacerbated the humanitarian crisis overtaking the Kurds.

C. The Concentration Camps

Perhaps as many as 2 million Kurds, Assyrians, and Chaldeans were moved from their villages after 1985. The luckier ones went to the cities to stay with relatives. There they were able to find employment or at least could live off the income of employed relatives. When the Kurdish military collapse came, these newly urbanized villagers, along with other city dwellers, had the food resources (often acquired at exorbitant blackmarket rates) and sometimes even the transport to flee.

Not so the inhabitants of the concentration camps, who number, according to Massoud Barzani, 1.1 million in 104 separate settlements. (This writer's independent estimate of the population was 1 million.) Mostly unemployed since the destruction of their villages,

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the concentration camp dwellers do not have the money to acquire food reserves.

In 1987 the Iraqi authorities would not permit a visit to the victory cities; in 1991 these concentration camps were liberated and thus accessible. They were also every bit as grim as they seemed from the highway 4 years ago. In a sprawling settlement of more than 10,000 near Zakho, a man was carrying grain treated with a vermin poison. To feed his family, the man intended to wash the poison off the grain. He said that several washings would be required.

In this particular concentration camp, there was just one well and it was highly polluted. Camp leaders said several children were dying each day of dysentery.

Children in a Kurdish concentration camp near Zakho, March 31, 1991.

The plight of the 10,000 Kurds in this Zakho area victory city is emblematic of the 1 million or more concentration camp inhabitants. As of Easter Sunday, when catastrophe was just beginning to overtake other Iraqi Kurds, these people already had no food and their children were already dying.

The concentration camp inhabitants had no food resources to make possible an escape to Turkey or Iran and, unlike the city dwellers, there was no transport of any kind available to these people. Thus as the urban Kurds fled, the concentration camp people stayed behind.

The 1 million inhabitants of the concentration camps are the invisible victims of the Kurdish disaster. They are not seen on television but their plight may be worse than that of the more visible refugees. These invisible Kurds have no food, no sanitation, and are at the mercy of a vindictive Iraqi army.

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The Peshmerga in Saddam Hussein's palace in Sarsanq, March 31, 1991.

Any potential defector to the rebel cause put everything at risk: his position, his life, his family's lives, the lives of his relatives. Given the negative signals from Washington, the potential military defectors sat on the fence. And while they did so, the anti-Saddam rebellion was crushed.

Other countries in the region were eager to assist the forces battling Saddam Hussein. Syria was the country in the region most strongly supportive of the anti-Saddam rebels and provided significant support to Shi'a, Sunni, and Kurdish opposition groups. Parties from all three ethnic/confessional groups make their headquarters in Damascus.

During the time the Kurds controlled northern Iraq, Syria generously permitted access to liberated Kurdistan through its territory. Syrian officials responded enthusiastically to suggestions of assistance from coalition countries to the Iraqi opposition to oust Saddam Hussein. However, Syrian officials were reluctant to go too far alone, and looked to the United States for leadership. None was forthcoming.

One reason suggested for U.S. reluctance to aid the anti-Saddam rebels was Saudi fears over the subversive impact of Shi'a or democratic success in Iraq. However, while the anti-Saddam rebellion was still underway, Saudi officials proposed that the United States and Saudi Arabia together militarily assist both Shi'a and Kurdish rebels. The Saudis indicated they had only recently developed contacts with the mainstream Iraqi opposition groups, but said they were prepared to support the Shi'a foes of Saddam as well as the Kurds. The Dawa party has sent Saudi Arabia a message assuring the Kingdom it has no intention of causing problems among the Shi'a in the strategically sensitive Eastern Province, and the

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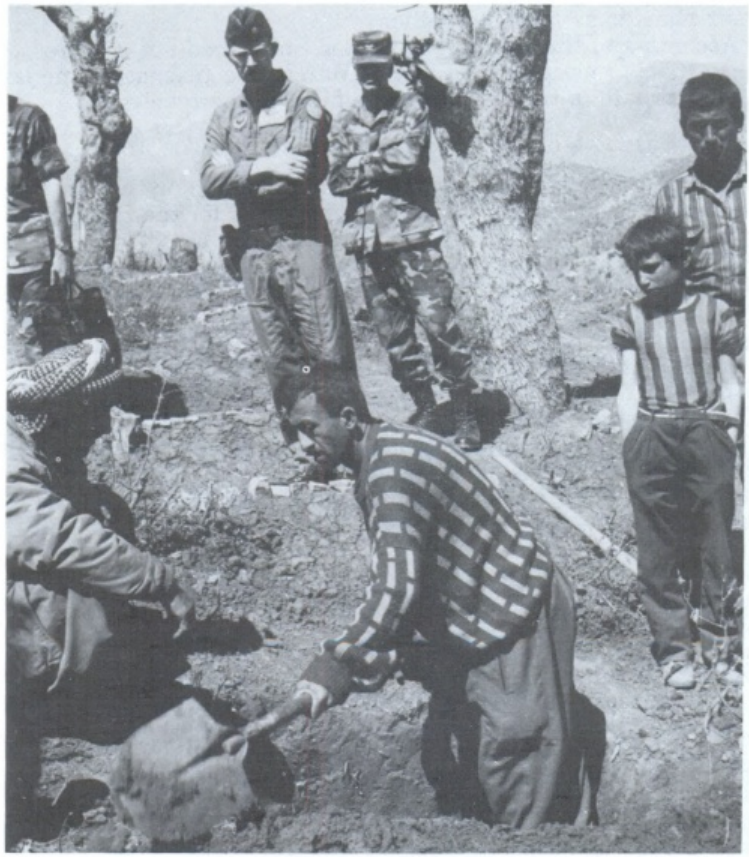

Digging the grave of a baby relative in the Isikveren refugee camp.

The United States armed forces are now doing an extraordinary job delivering food and other assistance to the Kurdish refugees. Because of the terrain, and because of limited road access to the mountains, the delivery of assistance is a logistical nightmare; only the ingenuity and dedication of U.S. servicemen and women is overcoming it.

However, it did take 3 weeks before these military operations were bringing adequate food to the Kurdish refugees on the Turkish border. Even now the mountain camps have inadequate sanitation and only limited water. Further, the much larger refugee population on the Iranian border has so far been excluded from U.S. assistance.

According to State Department estimates, Kurds are dying at a rate of 600 a day on the Turkish border. Another 1,000 or more may be dying on the Iranian border and, as always seems true with these megacatastrophes, the victims are the weakest of the community, the children and the aged. It is impossible not to conclude

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that this toll could have been much lower had the United States and other nations anticipated the uprising and its consequences. Instead, the Kurds were for too long a problem policymakers wished would go away.

A Kurdish mother and child in the mountains, March 31, 1991.

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to the mountain refuges. Unless help comes they will either be slaughtered or starve.

By late in the day we were back in Zakho, and the mood among my Kurdish companions had changed sharply. Clearly they were becoming aware of the extent of their military collapse. Dihok had fallen that morning and the shelling sounded close to Zakho. They decided to get me out to Syria as soon as possible, rather than waiting, as we had earlier agreed, to make the crossing under the cover of darkness. A young Kurd named Mohid was assigned to take me back to Syria. We drove out of Zakho along the Iraqi army road that parallels the Khabur River, which is the Turkish border. As we approached the Syrian border, we came under frequent artillery fire. With shells landing as close as 15 yards away, I made a dash across the mudflats to a sandbagged position at the river's edge. From there a small boat took me to Syria. The next day the Iraqis seized the border crossing.

Some of my Kurdish companions are now in Turkey, as I have discovered from seeing them quoted in the Western press. But so far I have heard nothing about Talabani or Hamzani. And of course I'll never know what happened to the children playing on Easter Sunday among the mountain almond blossoms.

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