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## Cloud Over Halabja Begins to Dissipate

Relief Sweeps Town Gassed by Hussein

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HALABJA, Iraq -- Fifteen years ago, this remote Kurdish town near the Iranian border entered the world's lexicon of modern-day horrors. First, Iraqi warplanes bombarded the rebellious enclave for several hours, shattering doors and windows. Then, at about 2 p.m., they swooped lower.

"We smelled something rotten, and when we breathed in, we couldn't breathe out," said Wais Abdel Qadr, a gaunt man of 30 with a deep and chronic cough. "The sky was full of smoke, and someone said it was chemicals. People started crying and running toward the mountains. I was burning and I became blind, but someone led me out. After walking for two days, we reached Iran."

Qadr was the only member of his family to survive the gassing of Halabja by the Iraqi military on March 16, 1988. About 5,000 people perished in an attack that stunned the world and revealed the ruthlessness of Iraq's president, Saddam Hussein.

Now that Hussein has been driven from power, Halabja's 50,000-odd residents can finally breathe freely again. Though dozens of blocks still lie in ruin and hundreds of residents still suffer from effects of the gassing, there is an atmosphere of relief in the streets and an unabashed pro-Americanism that has lingered long after people in many other parts of Iraq have soured on the U.S. military presence.

In the busy central bazaar this week, there was no hint of tension or danger. Shopkeepers in turbans and billowing trousers invited an American journalist for endless tiny glass cups of tea. Teenage boys proudly displayed collections of soccer cards (David Beckham and Ronaldo were the most popular), and cheered when a U.S. military helicopter passed overhead. White geese waddled proprietarily down the street. There was not soldier or gun in sight.

"Saddam wanted to kill us all, but now he's gone and the Americans have come to bring us law and democracy," said Jamil Azad, 35, who has fashioned a tea shop out of cinder blocks covered with sacks. His brother's family escaped to Iran and then Sweden after the 1988 attack, and he was eager to send them a message. "Please tell them Halabja is safe now," he said. "It's all right to come home."

Halabja is firmly under the sway of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), one of two major Kurdish parties that divided administrative power in this semiautonomous region of northern Iraq after the 1991 Persian Gulf War and continue to exercise control here.

The PUK contributed several thousand guerrilla fighters to the military campaign that toppled Hussein in April.

But the town is also home to several militant Islamic groups that once violently battled the PUK and that still make many residents uneasy. In recent weeks, the groups have fallen under the scrutiny of U.S. military forces, who suspect they may have links to al Qaeda or other armed Islamic movements.

On Saturday at dusk, a convoy of about 35 U.S. military vehicles roared into Halabja as attack helicopters hovered overhead. They went straight to the house of Ali Abdul Aziz, an Islamic leader in his eighties. The heavily armed troops burst in, handcuffed Abdul Aziz and took him and about 15 other men into custody, witnesses said. Then the convoy roared off again, with the choppers still circling.

When a journalist located the house on Sunday, it was full of women in black veils, wailing and shrieking in grief. In the parlor, Abdul Aziz's daughters and aides insisted repeatedly that he had done nothing wrong, that his group was nonviolent and wanted only to spread Islamic values in society.

"We expected the Americans to come and help Halabja rebuild. Instead they came to occupy us and make chaos," said Kamel Hajj Ali, a political aide to Aziz. He said his movement had split in 2001 from Ansar al-Islam -- a militia based in northeastern Iraq that is considered a terrorist group by U.S. officials -- and that it was now involved in mainstream politics. "We can think of no reason for this arrest," he said.

American military spokesmen in Baghdad would not comment on the raid, but Kurdish regional officials in the nearby city of Sulaymaniyah said they fully supported the U.S. actions. So did many Halabja residents, who said they were afraid of the Islamic group because it had a history of violence and intimidation.

Despite the revitalizing effect that the fall of Hussein has had on Halabja, the town is still very much a place in mourning.

Virtually every family here lost a relative in the gassing, and the main cemetery is full of large, grassy plots where entire clans are buried. A sign at the entrance says "Baathists Keep Out," a reference to the Baath Party that was headed by Hussein and controlled the country for 35 years.

The town's major landmark is a stark white monument to the dead. Inside is a plaster tableau of lifelike victims frozen as they fell, covered with chemical ash and cradling their children for protection. The center is a rotunda in which some 5,000 victims' names are carved in black stone.

The 1988 attack, in which Hussein's bombers dropped a mixture of nerve and mustard gases, occurred near the end of the Iran-Iraq war, in which some Kurdish guerrilla groups

fought on the Iranian side. The incident spurred an outpouring of aid from around the world that rebuilt schools, clinics, houses and orphanages.

Yet officials and residents complained this week that the help fell far short of what was needed to rebuild their devastated town or bring back thousands of inhabitants who fled abroad. They acknowledged that their joyful reaction to Hussein's ouster has been partly linked to the hope that it will bring more foreign aid.

"Halabja was once a beautiful and historic place. We had famous poets, and we took many heroic stands," said Jamil Abdulrahman Mohammed, the mayor. "When Saddam fell, everyone here fired shots in the air" in celebration. "But over the years we have had so many martyrs, so many missing, so many who ran away. You cannot rebuild the spirit of a place with bricks."

If Abdel Qadr is any example, however, the determination to revive Halabja is strong.

Despite his medical problems, Abdel Qadr, who teaches Arabic in a local school, helped establish the Halabja Society Against Chemical Weapons and spends all of his spare time keeping the organization alive. Standing in the ruined courtyard of his childhood house, where his mother, father, sisters and brothers all died in the gassing, Abdel Qadr said he could visualize the horror as if it had happened yesterday.

"Sometimes I think the only reason I survived was to tell people what happened," he mused. "It has been a long time, but I think now I can be happy. Saddam is in the dustbin of history, and the black cloud has gone from the Iraqi sky."

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