

Profile: Social and political conditions that lead to genocide

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BOB EDWARDS, host: The US military has issued a new list of Iraq's most wanted. The 32 names include key suspects in the post-Saddam insurgency against the US occupation. Of the 55 names on the military's original list, all but 10 have been killed or captured. Number one on that list was Saddam Hussein. Iraqi authorities say they plan to put the captured former leader on trial as early as the summer for mass murder and other crimes against the Iraqi people. A trial would reveal details of Saddam's nearly 25-year regime and give the dictator a chance to defend himself before a worldwide audience. NPR's Christopher Joyce reports that the trial also could reveal more about the social and political conditions that lead to genocide.

CHRISTOPHER JOYCE reporting:

Genocide is a 20th century word. It was invented during the Holocaust to describe the annihilation of a group by the state, but Old Testament stories and Homeric epics suggest the practice is ancient. What is new is that people are now tried for it under international law. Human rights groups say there's abundant evidence the Iraqi government committed genocide against the Kurds in Iraq in the late 1980s. They say persecution of Shia Muslims in the south in the 1990s could constitute crimes against humanity: widescale murder, though not an attempt to wipe out a whole population. Besides Saddam's guilt or innocence, a trial could also dwell on the question of: What caused his government to commit mass murder? It's a subject that preoccupies Gregory Stanton, who runs a group called Genocide Watch. Stanton helped create the international tribunal for the Rwanda genocide in 1994. He says certain cultural risks heighten the risk of genocide, the way fault lines mark an earthquake zone.

Mr. GREGORY STANTON (Genocide Watch): I think the key thing is a multiethnic society in which one group is seen as a threat to the group that is in power, a plural society where there is, nevertheless, an ideology of intolerance. JOYCE: Like the Hutus and Tutsis of Rwanda and the Christian Serbs and Muslims of the former Yugoslavia. But lots of countries are multiethnic and harbor old animosities. There has to be more. Political scientist and genocide expert Barbara Harff from the US Naval Academy notes that, for example, Belgian and Flemish ethnic groups have lived in harmony for centuries. In Iraq, though, a minority ethnic group held absolute control.

Ms. BARBARA HARFF (US Naval Academy): In situations like Iraq, you have the Kurds, majority Arabs. Plus, you have additional divisions, Sunni minority running a Shiite country. You know, there it means something because it's a dictatorship, and you have an ideology that guides this dictatorship.

JOYCE: Harff has created a computer model that calculates how much political and social events raise the risk of genocide, things like civil war or past instances of mass murder. When applied to historical trouble spots, the program correctly identified three of every four countries that crossed the line into genocide. To her surprise, Harff found that poverty did not add much to the risk. Minority rule did; so did national isolation, the kind of Rwanda experienced, for example.

Ms. HARFF: You know, a country that's totally ignored by the international community, it can literally get away with murder because nobody cares.

JOYCE: Harff says US intelligence agencies are testing her model to identify potential genocides around the world. Another predictor is a government's leader. Iraq's government was highly personalized around Saddam Hussein. Samantha Power, a Harvard University professor who wrote a Pulitzer Prize-winning book about genocide, says Saddam set an example for using murder as a political tool. Then political murder became mass murder in the late 1980s. The Kurdish minority in northern Iraq was fighting for political autonomy and allied themselves with Iran during the Iran-Iraq War.

Professor SAMANTHA POWER (Harvard University): Regimes, usually state actors, use the presence of an insurgency as both a pretext and a spark in a way for getting rid of a minority claimant to rights or territory or power. And I think that's what the Iraqi case has in common, let's say, with the Rwandan genocide and even the Bosnia genocide of the early to mid-'90s.

JOYCE: What followed was a campaign to depopulate a large swath of northern Iraq of Kurds. Villages were bombarded with poison gas, and some regions were Arabized by moving in non-Kurds from the south. The Kurds became the 'other,' the threat to the nation's integrity and history, and Saddam portrayed himself as Iraq's protector. He mobilized

underlying ethnic divisions. According to Ervin Staub, a psychologist at the University of Massachusetts and expert on war crimes, this is a common thread in genocide.

Mr. ERVIN STAUB (University of Massachusetts): Almost invariably some ideology's also involved; that is, a vision of some better world. The ideology may be a nationalistic ideology: elevating the nation, re-creating past greatness. And this ideology is destructive because it leads to the identification of some people as enemies that stand in the way. JOYCE: Staub says charismatic leaders often play on historical grievances to encourage divisions. This was a theme in Iraq as well as Serbia under Slobodan Milosevic, who's now on trial for genocide at an international tribunal in the Netherlands. This archaeology of genocide may be revealed if and when Saddam Hussein takes the stand. But if previous genocide trials are a guide, prosecutors will focus mostly on witnesses and documents that link Saddam Hussein to the machinery of genocide. Samantha Power says the larger question of why thousands of Iraqis carried out the orders handed down by Saddam's regime may never be answered.

Prof. POWER: You know, the people who drove the buses from the places where men had been rounded up in the villages, you know, into the deserts; the people who dug the mass graves; the people who then lined these men up and mowed them down with machine guns; those who, you know, secured the chemical weapons that would be used--so many people involved in this elaborate machine of death, really. I think many of those people will not be prosecuted in a court of law.

JOYCE: Nor is a trial likely to raise the question whether anyone could have stopped the genocide. Hanny Megally is a human rights expert with the International Center for Transitional Justice and has followed Saddam's regime for years. Mr. HANNY MEGALLY (International Center for Transitional Justice): To a certain extent Saddam Hussein was supported financially and militarily by the West during a period of time when many of these violations were occurring. And, you know, there are questions, obviously, to be raised about why at that time the international community either turned a blind eye or was not willing to stand up and speak for the people.

JOYCE: During the time Iraq's government was gassing Iranian soldiers, US government officials visited Saddam Hussein. Most notable among them was envoy Donald Rumsfeld, now the secretary of Defense. Rumsfeld's message to Saddam then was Iran was a threat, and Iraq was a valued bulwark against radical Islam. Christopher Joyce, NPR News