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A Keeper of Secrets Now Opens Up About Iraq's Dead

By NEELA BANERJEE

ZUBAYR, Iraq — A former Iraqi intelligence officer, Sabi al-Hamed made a career of keeping quiet. Now he wants to talk, and it is the dead he talks about.

Late one afternoon, Mr. Hamed stood on a bald field on the far reaches of this southern town, and the dead were all around him.

"I need to find just one number," he said, looking for a grave marker, "and then I can orient myself."

For 11 years, until recently, Mr. Hamed was the caretaker of this cemetery for the Mukhabarat, the feared Iraqi intelligence service. The dead had stopped arriving in truckloads by the time he came here, but Mr. Hamed said he held the meticulous files in his office and knew that 6,011 people were buried here.

"I knew all this but I didn't talk," he said. "I became a silent devil. I knew the truth."

With what he knows of this place and others around the southern city of Basra, Mr. Hamed hopes to take the living to their dead. Many of those killed under Saddam Hussein's rule were dumped in mass graves, but the dead in Zubayr were buried individually and most of their identities were cataloged in files.

But now that Mr. Hamed is free to talk, there is little else he can do. The files, he said, were taken from his office just before the war when he was away on a business trip.

"I can talk, but I have no documentation," he said. "If I tell you your grandmother is buried here somewhere, what will you do? Go through all 6,000 graves? You'd say, 'Is this a joke?' "

It is, instead, the peril of unearthing the past here. Human rights groups have estimated that about 300,000 Iraqis are missing and were probably executed. Free to search for the disappeared now, Iraqis have sometimes exhumed mass graves haphazardly, leading to confusion about the identities of the people found and how they were killed. There is no central repository of files about the missing or claims from those who seek them, and no detailed long-term plan to reunite the lost with the spared.

"Honestly, the hope of reuniting people in Iraq should be more than other places," said Mona Rishmawi, a senior United Nations adviser to the secretary general's special representative in Iraq. "The people who lost family are often middle class, educated. They can give records. What is needed is a strategy that works."

The 40-acre cemetery near Zubayr lies deep within the Berjissiya oil field, owned by South Oil Company, an ideal place to put bodies out of sight. It is the ledger of a violent government: 2,000 unidentified Iraqi soldiers from the Iran-Iraq war; 480 Iranians; 114 Kuwaitis from the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1990, though the bodies have since been mysteriously removed; and more than 3,000 executed in the suppression of the 1991 Shiite uprising.

In places, graves rise in rows like the knobs of a spine. But rain and time have flattened much of the earth and rusted away many of the numbers on the small metal markers. Other markers litter the ground. Only where the Shiites lie are there cinder blocks that hold most of the markers in place.

Since the fall of Mr. Hussein's government, some people have learned about the cemetery. Mr. Hamed worries that grave robbers have come to take remains and sell them to Iranian families desperate for someone to bury. There is a house in Basra, he said, where such transactions take place.

It is hard to know why a man like Mr. Hamed, who joined the intelligence service in 1976, just after graduating from college with an engineering degree, would open up now.

"In this situation of an ex-Mukhabarat officer, it's very difficult to know if he is sincere," said Ghanim al-Najjar, a Kuwaiti consultant with Amnesty International who frequently works in the Basra area. "At least from his actions, he is still following up on cases and giving reasonable information."

Mr. Hamed started in commercial espionage, following the activities of foreign companies in Iraq. But once the Iran-Iraq war began in 1980, he traveled to Iran to gather information and, later, served as a negotiator in returning prisoners of war and the remains of the war dead. Keeping an eye on the cemetery became an additional responsibility.

Mr. Hamed did the paperwork and helped keep up the longstanding charade that the cemetery was populated with unidentified soldiers from the Iran-Iraq war. But he appreciated what sort of place this was.

He saw the lists of Shiites from Basra who had been executed and recognized names of people he knew, but he said he feared that if he said anything he would risk imprisonment himself.

When British troops entered southern Iraq in April, he told them of the cemetery. He told them of the remains of 500 Iraqis who had been held as prisoners of war by Iran and that he had been unable to return to their families. He told them of an agreement between the former government and Iran to dig up the thousands of soldiers who perished in the battle of Fao in southern Iraq.

Mr. Hamed said he now worked for the British, assisting in the return of Iranian and Iraqi remains, and was struggling to find a way to return at least those 500 men to their families. But the cemetery seems to consume him. He said he thought his files had been stolen by his Mukhabarat colleagues because "the files would condemn them." He refuses to believe that they were simply destroyed.

He wonders how Iraqis can ever know if their relatives are here. He asks whether someone from the West can set up a lab to do forensic testing. Otherwise, he says, the dead will remain lost to the living.

"Look at it: it is all being stolen now," he said, coming across five more open graves. "You come today and see it with your own eyes. Tomorrow you won't see it anymore."