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Digging Up the Past in Iraq's Killing Fields

By PETER BOUCKAERT

Balkis Hassun had spent an entire day looking through bags filled with rotting human remains when I met her. Her 14-year-old son, Ali, had disappeared one day in March 1991, after she had asked him to go to the river for water. Now, just as quickly as the hope had risen that she would finally discover his fate, she started confronting the reality that she would never find his body.

Around us was a scene of utter chaos and horror. Since early morning, a backhoe had been digging up the earth, often uncovering dozens of corpses in a single scoop. Bodies were piled everywhere. I noticed an artificial leg among the remains and, nearby, a corpse with crutches. Occasionally a piercing scream would rise above the crowd as a body was identified by relatives.

Some of the victims were buried with identification cards in their wallets. Many in the desperate crowd, however, snatched at the slightest bit of hope, staring for hours at stained clothing in case they might recognize something belonging to a missing loved one. I saw one man carry off the remains of a body that he swore was his brother's simply because he found a pack of his brother's favorite cigarettes with the remains.

Similar scenes are playing out all over Iraq. Exhuming a mass grave with a backhoe is like hunting pigeons with a tank. Sadly, most of the desperate civilians who flock to places like Mahawil will leave with uncertainty, and may have unwittingly destroyed their last chance to emotionally reunite with their missing relatives. In addition, the absence of forensic expertise at the graves means that evidence needed to prosecute the murderers of Iraq may also be destroyed.

This is in sharp contrast to what happened in 1999 in Kosovo, when NATO forces worked with the International Criminal Tribunal for former Yugoslavia to secure sites and enable exhumations almost as soon as Slobodan Milosevic's troops pulled out. As soon as possible, the international community must organize a similar process to aid Iraqi families, to allow at least a possibility for proper identification and preservation of evidence. In the meantime, coalition forces must protect the graves.

When I spoke to a Marine commander here, he said his orders were to "secure" and "assist" at scenes of war crimes. Apparently, this meant securing the sites where crimes were committed against American soldiers, and assisting when the graves held the remains of Iraqis. And what did he mean by assisting, I asked. He told me that the troops had brought water to the site that day.

As I left Balkis Hassun, the woman looking for her young son, she was softly crying, and soon I was also near tears. It is one thing to think abstractly of the number of people missing, quite another to sit down and talk to a woman about the memory of her beloved son. Looking at the marines standing on the nearby hill taking snapshots, I was at a loss to find words of hope.

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