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AFTEREFFECTS: WAR CRIMES; Mass Grave in Iraq May Hold Kuwaitis Missing Since 1991

By PATRICK E. TYLER

A map provided by a former driver for Iraqi military intelligence brought Abdulaziz al-Qubaisi Abu Musab to the abandoned Iraqi military camp here this morning in search of the answer to the question that most Kuwaitis have asked -- and dreaded -- since the end of the 1991 Persian Gulf war: where are the nearly 600 missing Kuwaitis?

Mr. Abu Musab, a member of the Iraqi National Congress, the political movement headed by Ahmad Chalabi, said he had been given the map by a man who, in October 1991, was among the drivers who took the Kuwaiti prisoners to their execution in Baghdad and subsequent burial here, 50 miles west of the capital.

It was impossible to speak directly to this driver, who calls himself Samir and still fears for his life, or to say today how accurate his account of the execution is. But the map he gave Mr. Abu Musab proved very accurate.

For the past 12 years, Kuwait has demanded to know the fate of nearly 600 prisoners taken by Saddam Hussein's security forces after the country was invaded by Iraq in 1990. It has offered \$1 million for information. Mr. Abu Musab said attempts to mobilize Kuwaiti or United States military help to open the suspected mass grave here had drawn no response for days.

So, today, he put a tractor and backhoe on a trailer and drove west from Baghdad past American checkpoints and burned-out Iraqi tanks to this gentle slope of desert facing the crystalline Lake Habbaniya shimmering in the early summer heat.

He straddled the mechanical claw and began digging. He had to go deep, 10 feet down, past a viper that he disturbed and then killed, through gravel and sand, because that is where Samir said the bodies were heaped in three places marked on the carefully drawn map.

Then, just where Samir's map said they were, he found the first 40 decomposed bodies that, according to the driver's account, are the first installment of nearly 600 Kuwaiti corpses.

If forensic examinations confirm Samir's account, the mass grave here would answer one of the most painful and enduring mysteries for Kuwait, the tiny American ally that fought invasion and occupation in 1990-91 and, 12 years later, turned over much of its country to United States-led forces that drove Mr. Hussein from power last month.

The bodies lay in bundles, the same jumble of bones, decay and bits of fabric that the earth is yielding all over Iraq.

Some skulls betrayed execution wounds. Green plastic ties that can be used as handcuffs were scattered among the remains. A finger bone was all that lay within the coil of one. A random shoe separated from its owner still held a constellation of foot bones that had collapsed to one flat dimension without the flesh that once gave them shape.

"They killed them in Baghdad and brought the bodies here," Mr. Abu Musab said.

In pre-empting allied forces and the forensic specialists whose task it will be to document the mass graves that are being unearthed throughout Iraq, Mr. Chalabi's group appeared to be trying to elevate the priority that American officials have assigned to the investigation of the killings by Saddam Hussein's security forces.

Mr. Chalabi, by taking matters into his own hands in a period of political transition here, appeared to be pushing himself forward on an issue that has the potential to galvanize the Iraqi people by calling attention to the mass killings.

The ambition of Mr. Chalabi to play a central role in the governance of postwar Iraq is well known, and he has strong allies in the Pentagon. But many Iraqis are hostile to him.

"This grim discovery, together with the mass grave sites being found across the country in cities like Hilla, reveal to the world the scope of the brutality of Saddam's regime and his crimes against humanity," Mr. Chalabi said. "The world must act now to assist the Iraqi people with proper forensic experts and documentation specialists, so that the full extent of Saddam's crimes can be uncovered."

In a pointed criticism of Arab leaders, one he has already made, he added, "Those who supported this regime are now witnessing the monster that they enabled."

Mr. Abu Musab gave this account of what Samir told him in a meeting in Baghdad three or four days ago:

The killing began one morning in October 1991 at 8:30. The frightened Kuwaitis -- blindfolded, with hands bound by lime-green plastic ties -- were ordered into horseshoe formations at the training school for the intelligence service in Baghdad. The prisoners had been brought there that morning in vans and buses.

A single intelligence man carrying a machine gun positioned himself inside the horseshoe. The prisoners wept and cried out the Muslim prayer before death: there is no god but God.

The gunfire began. The shooter pivoted, according to the account provided to Mr. Abu Musab, using the horseshoe formation to make the executions quicker.

Formation after formation was brought forward until all were dead. All were men, save one.

In Samir's account, he and three other drivers then loaded the bodies onto Mercedes trucks and drove them to this base, where one 10-foot-deep pit already was cut into the sand. Two other pits were dug to hold the remaining bodies near a large sand berm, a water tower and a fence.

When the work was done, Samir and the other drivers and 15 men who had helped with the burial were forced to live here for three months as the desert removed all traces of their grisly dig.

Before they were allowed to leave, they were warned that if they ever talked, Iraqi intelligence would find them and kill them.

Today, Samir is just another unemployed Iraqi who does not want to advertise his old profession, but he has heard about Kuwait's offer of a \$1 million reward for information leading to the recovery of its missing.

"But he is still scared that someone in intelligence will take revenge because the people who participated in this act are still around," Mr. Abu Musab said.