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## A Grim Graveyard Window on Hussein's Iraq

By SUSAN SACHS

HILLA, Iraq, May 30 — He was a good soldier, so when he heard the first crack of the executioners' guns, Fadel al-Shaati said he instinctively dropped to the ground and pressed himself against a wall of the freshly dug trench.

He could not get it straight in his mind. The men firing at him were comrades in arms, men of his own Iraqi Army. But they had inexplicably dragged him from his bed in his nightclothes, as they had so many others, and forced him, blindfolded and bound, into this pit in the darkness of night.

Now, 12 years later, Mr. Shaati cannot remember if the women and children beside him screamed as the bullets hit, or whether the men in the hole moaned as they died. He only recalls a moment of hollow silence when the soldiers stopped shooting.

Then came the throaty rumble of a backhoe and the thud of wet earth dropping on bodies. He survived but saw hundreds of other innocents buried in another of Saddam Hussein's anonymous mass graves.

The killing ground of Hilla lies between pockmarked fields, stands of date palms and tufted pastures where sheep and cattle graze. Even today, after the bullet-shattered remains of more than 3,000 people have been pulled from its soil, there is nothing much to distinguish it on the pastoral landscape.

What is remarkable about the site is that it is just one of dozens, possibly hundreds, of secret graveyards scattered across Iraq.

"The truly frightening part is that the number of suspected mass graves is so unfathomable," said Sandra L. Hodgkinson, a State Department official who has been documenting some of the sites for the American occupation forces in Iraq. "They are everywhere. Literally every neighborhood and town is reporting possible grave sites, and from all different periods of time. I think we're going to find them everywhere."

No one really knows how many people were slaughtered by the Iraqi government over the past 35 years. It apparently killed its citizens on a huge scale, both systematically and indiscriminately. Human rights groups, which have tried to document the carnage for years, estimate that nearly 300,000 Iraqis are missing and were probably executed. Tens of thousands more, according to Iraqi opposition groups, may have been imprisoned and tortured, their lives warped forever by what they saw and experienced.

The executions took place through the late 1970's and 1980's, when Iraq's Arab neighbors and most Western governments considered Saddam Hussein an ally against the threat of Islamic militancy in Iran. They occurred, survivors and witnesses said, while American troops were still occupying much of southern Iraq, sometimes just on the outskirts of the killing fields, in the weeks after the Persian Gulf war in 1991.

The government killed in purges aimed at specific political opposition groups, like the Communists, and it killed to suppress the political ambitions of the Shiite Muslim majority. It killed the relatives of dissidents, Muslim clerics and Christians whose loyalty was suspect. It killed Kurds, with bullets and poison gas, in a wholesale campaign meant to subdue an entire ethnic group.

The killing continued through that decade and beyond, when much of the world shunned but tolerated the Iraqi leader.

Iraq, post-Hussein, is a reflection of the misery its people suffered. But it is also rediscovering its pain, now that the prisons have been emptied and the reality of the mass graves exposed. No longer can the relatives of the missing console themselves with the hope that their loved ones might turn up. With that realization, many people are bitterly striking out at a world that seemed indifferent to their fate for so long.

Every day, young men from the nearby village of Husseinini come to the Hilla burial ground and carefully wrap the unclaimed bones in strips of white muslin, tying up the brittle little bundles at each end. Sometimes, in a simulation of the Muslim tradition of washing the dead, they tenderly stroke the exposed skulls.

The men from Husseinini come because they want to find the 60 men taken from their village in March 1991, when Republican Guard troops brutally put down a Shiite uprising. The men have only identified 10 of their missing neighbors in the field by the palm trees, but they have not lost hope. They believe there are four or five other mass graves in the immediate area that have yet to be excavated.

If they were thankful for the American invasion that toppled the Iraqi government, their gratitude has soured a bit with every pile of bones they exhume. American troops were in Iraq at the time of these killings, they said, but they stood by.

"All those years, the families of these people were waiting for them to come home," said Raid al-Husseinini, a doctor from the village, as he surveyed the scarred landscape. "All those years since 1991, Saddam Hussein was alive. But the Iraqi people were left for dead, whether they were walking on this earth or lying in a mass grave."

### A Roundup of Young Men

Iraq is a land of tormented survivors and ghosts. "And miracles," said Mr. Shaati, who needed one to survive execution in a dark field near Hilla 12 years ago.

He is 39 now, a gaunt man who makes his living as a mechanic. Until last week, he had told no one but his father what he saw in that trench. "He told me not to tell this to anyone because they would realize I was a witness and I would be killed," Mr. Shaati said. "So I didn't. I couldn't sentence myself to death again."

In 1991, he was just a tired soldier who wanted to get home.

The Iraqi Army, driven from Kuwait by American-led forces, was disintegrating. As it collapsed, so did the government's control of Shiite cities in the south and much of the Kurdish north. Emboldened by the suggestion from the first President Bush that they rebel against Mr. Hussein, Iraqis attacked government offices and killed Baath Party officials.

In the pandemonium, Mr. Shaati bolted for home, arriving in Hilla just as the largely Shiite city began its own feeble revolt in early March. Within a week, special Republican Guard units arrived and began rounding up any young men they could find.

Mr. Shaati was taken one day at 4 a.m. and transferred to Mahawil military base, a sprawling compound of corrugated steel warehouses and low concrete buildings that became a staging area for that spring's killings.

As the detainees milled about waiting for instructions, Iraqi soldiers opened fire on the crowd, Mr. Shaati said. "I remember one officer shouting: 'If you shoot them here, you're just going to mess this place up with all the blood and filth. Take them somewhere else and kill them.' So they stopped shooting and pushed us into the big warehouses."

He spent six days there, in a crowded room with no food or water. A man he knew who suffered from ulcers died at his feet. "After two days, the body smelled horrible and we begged them to take it away. But nobody did anything."

The soldiers took them out in groups of 100 to 150 people. When his time came, Mr. Shaati was ordered to remove his T-shirt and rip it into strips that were tied over his eyes and around his hands. The prisoners were herded onto a bus, everyone holding on with their teeth to the shirt of the person in front of them. When they arrived at a field — Mr. Shaati is still not sure where — their grave had already been prepared.

"They led us down an incline into a wide long hole," he said. "It was quiet. No one fell or even cried. I was positioned very close to the corner, maybe second or third from the wall. Then they started shooting. Somehow I wasn't hit. By then, I guess, they didn't go to the trouble of shooting all of us."

After the grave was covered, Mr. Shaati, alive but choking on dirt, wormed his way out of the ditch. He punched through the earthen blanket with his head, and worked himself free of the cloth straps. Gulping the cold night air, he knew that all his soldierly ideas about honor and country counted for nothing.

"That's the worst thing," he said. "To fight for them and then be slaughtered."

That is why, in his view, American forces could conquer Iraq so quickly 12 years later. "We didn't fight," he said. "It's not that we were afraid of them. But we sold our country in order to get rid of Saddam Hussein."

### Guilt by Association

Her most disturbing memory is of the time she felt nothing but her own pain.

After the beatings and electric shocks, Suriya Abdel Khader would find herself once again in the fetid cell, a room so crowded that most prisoners could only stand. The women died upright, then slumped to the floor, but Ms. Abdel Khader remembers registering only a dull flash of annoyance whenever that happened.

"Get this body out of the way," she would think to herself. "It's taking up room."

She was imprisoned, she believes, because her four brothers had been arrested in Mr. Hussein's blanket crackdown on Shiites suspected of supporting Iran or the Islamic Dawa Party.

The systematic arrest of Shiites, and the torture and the executions that began in 1979, were the first of the Iraqi leader's huge purges. Men were rounded up first. It was not long before entire families were swallowed by the prisons and the execution grounds.

"They took the first of my brothers in 1980," said Ms. Abdel Khader, a plump, blue-eyed woman who had been searching the mass graves for traces of her vanished siblings. "He was 16. He was part of a group feared by the regime: he prayed at the mosque."

Two more brothers, ages 17 and 18, were arrested in 1985 when Iraqi soldiers raided a remote farm where many young Shiite men had gone to avoid the government's house-to-house searches. She learned that a friend of her brothers was wounded, so she left bandages for him near the farm. That day, she was also arrested, along with her father, sister and a 3-year-old brother.

She spent one year being moved from prison to torture center to prison and back. Her tormenters would hang her from a hook in the ceiling by her arms, which were bound behind her back. Sometimes they added electric shocks. Sometimes they beat her on the soles of her feet until they were engorged with blood and her toenails fell off.

She was 25.

"I was lucky that I became like a dead body," she said. "I didn't know what was going on around me. There was no water, no bathroom. The only food was two big pots they brought in, one with dirty rice and one of soup. You had to fight for it. If you were strong and healthy, you'd get food. If you were weak, you'd wait."

After the torture came the sham trial, then a sentence to spend her life at Rashad women's prison, a maze of unheated cells where the sewage would float from the one toilet down the corridors and seep onto the women's rough mattresses.

"They'd make us wait for water," she said, "and we'd have to gather it drop by drop from the pipes in the early morning."

Women with death sentences were kept in the same compound where she stayed. The executions followed a schedule, like trains. "We knew that on Sundays and Wednesdays, they came and took the Shiite prisoners. There were other days for the Kurds and the Christians and everybody else."

She was released in 1991, in one of Mr. Hussein's sporadic amnesties, and married a man who had lost five brothers to the same campaign against Shiites. Last week, she took him to see the prison, where squatters have now set up house in the cell where she once suffered.

Memories surged to the surface, so powerful that Ms. Abdel Khader, a sturdy woman, swayed like a storm-tossed willow tree.

"All this because I brought bandages to an injured boy," she said in a flat voice, turning to leave. "That was my big crime against Saddam Hussein."

#### Random Executions

Clawing through the dirt, Abdelhassan al-Mohani collected his brother bone by bone.

He knelt in a hole at the edge of a cemetery near the village of Muhammad Sakran, just outside Baghdad. The faded writing on a plastic armband in the grave told him this was his brother, Abdelhussein. Mr. Mohani held the skull and gently brushed the dirt from the eye socket. Then he wept.

Abdelhussein had disappeared on his way to work in Baghdad on Jan. 23, 1981. His family never heard a word from the government, but eventually they drew the obvious conclusion: as a Shiite, he must have been arrested in the Islamic Dawa Party roundup.

Ten years later, Saddam Hussein's agents found the family again.

On April 11, 1991, a few weeks into the Shiite rebellion, Iraqi helicopters dropped leaflets over Karbala ordering everyone to leave or be attacked with chemical weapons. Mr. Mohani piled his relatives into a pickup truck and a car and fled.

About four miles south of the city, the escape route was blocked. There, he said, he saw Mr. Hussein's son-in-law, Hussein Kamal, executing people randomly at a checkpoint. "He was telling people to get out of their cars and then he would shoot them, shoot them until his arm was too tired to do it anymore."

The helicopter gunships returned. They hovered like lazy birds and fired.

"I had a friend from the army," Mr. Mohani said. "He was walking. Lots of people were walking and the helicopters were shooting at them. My friend's wife was shot in the leg. They had four kids and he and the children just sat with her, sat with her until she died."

Scarred for Life

"Pray." That was the last thing Nasir al-Husseini's mother said to him before the shooting started.

It was April 1991 and they had ventured out on a walk from their village of Sadha with two 12-year-old relatives. It seemed safe. The fighting between rebels and the forces of the government was over.

At a checkpoint, they were stopped by jittery Iraqi soldiers and arrested. Two days later, bound and blindfolded, they were dumped in an open field with hundreds of other people.

Mr. Husseini was only 10 at the time.

"We arrived at a place where a shovel had already made a hole," he said. "We saw a brick factory and behind us a small canal. They started taking us out in ones and twos."

His mother tried to keep him close, but her hands were tied and she could not hold the children. They all stumbled into the ready-made grave.

"They were shooting at us, but I didn't get hit," Mr. Husseini said. "I was lying on top of my mother. Then someone came down in the hole and dragged me up by my collar and yelled, 'Shoot this kid!' I was pretending to be dead. And they started shooting at me again, but still I didn't get hit. Then the shovel came."

He felt himself being lifted with the dirt and dropped once again into the hole.

"I rolled myself to the edge and then to a place where there were reeds and water and the reeds were all sticking in my face," he recalled. "My body wasn't covered with the dirt, just my head. I could breathe but I didn't move. A man came to check and was standing over the hole where everyone was buried and he called to the shovel driver, 'Come and cover this kid.' But the driver, maybe he didn't hear, because he didn't come."

"I could still hear the sounds of the motors of the buses but after awhile I heard them driving away," he continued. "I listened and then there was silence. So I lifted my head and I stood up. I saw nothing. Just a small hill where the hole had been."

He walked toward the lights of a highway. His clothes were wet with blood. Out of the darkness, he suddenly saw four men, apparently army deserters. "They forced me to tell them what happened and I told them, and they said, 'Stop, stop. Don't talk about this anymore.' We walked

until we reached a small canal and they washed my hands and clothes and face until they were sure I didn't have any more blood or dirt on me."

The men dropped him at his aunt's house. She, too, refused to hear the story. "She said, 'Stop saying these things. Don't talk about this anymore.' Everyone said, 'He's lying, he's crazy.' But when my dad came back on leave from the army, he knew I was telling the truth and he knew his family had been killed."

When people started exhuming the bodies in the Hilla field three weeks ago, Mr. Hussein returned to his nightmare as he joined the search.

"I walked and I was pushing the dirt aside with my feet, and I saw a shirt with bullet holes," he said as he described how he looked for his mother's body. "I had something in my heart that said this was the place. But we didn't find her. Then the neighbors said that four years ago, some Iraqi soldiers came and dug up some of the bones to give to Iran in a prisoner exchange. I told my dad, and he said, 'Don't go there anymore. You don't have to prove anything to me.'"

Mr. Hussein is 22 now, a solitary young man with a curl of dark hair falling over his forehead.

"I never allowed myself to live all these years," he said. "Every day I thought, now they're going to come and take me. I was always waiting."

He has no use for talk of justice or retribution. "Whatever you're going to do to them, it won't be enough. For a long time I thought I was the only one who lost someone. Then I saw all those people lining up and looking for their lost people at that mass grave. And I thought, what can possibly be done to help them?"