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AFTER THE WAR: SOUTHERN IRAQ; Wolfowitz Visits Mass Graveyard of Hussein's Victims and Promises Help in Hunting Killers

By ERIC SCHMITT

For a solid month, nine trucks a day pulled up to a field off a dirt road here and unloaded their human cargo. Men, women and children were herded into a freshly dug pit where Saddam Hussein's henchmen gunned them down and buried them, sometimes while they were still alive.

Now, 12 years later, the killing field of Hilla is just one of 62 mass graveyards that American and allied investigators have discovered in southern Iraq since the end of the war.

About 3,000 bodies have been unearthed here, but townspeople say thousands more probably decomposed in the shallow water table over the last decade. Relatives have claimed about 1,000 sets of the remains. The rest are wrapped in white plastic bags and spread out over the neatly leveled soil, in silent testimony to the horrors of Mr. Hussein's three-decade rule.

"Obviously, for those people, liberation didn't come in time," Deputy Defense Secretary Paul D. Wolfowitz said today, visiting here as part of a five-day trip throughout Iraq.

No one knows for sure how many people died in Mr. Hussein's purges aimed at terrorizing and suppressing political opponents and religious rivals, including the Shiite Muslim majority in this part of Iraq. American and Iraqi officials here today said the total probably ran into the hundreds of thousands.

Mr. Wolfowitz called those who executed the villagers here "monsters," and promised a group of local Iraqis who joined him today that the occupying forces would lend whatever aid necessary to help track down the killers. A team of British forensic experts was just here, and there are plans to help start an Iraqi bureau of missing persons.

The United States marines who occupy this part of south-central Iraq have already started case files on many of the killings.

"I look at this like an organized-crime case," said Maj. Al Schmidt, a Marine reservist in charge of mass-grave survey work, who is an F.B.I. agent in civilian life. "Saddam Hussein is the head, and these are all the tentacles."

Local Iraqis, while grateful to the Americans for driving Mr. Hussein from power, nonetheless said they felt that the United States could be doing more to hunt down the killers. "We want human rights for the Iraqi people," said Dr. Rafid al-Hussuni, the Hilla grave-site coordinator.

The Iraqis said American forces had squandered opportunities to capture suspected executioners. The military recently arrested Muhammad Juwad Anayfas, a tribal sheik who officials said owned this field and took part in the killings. But his American jailers mistakenly set him free in a paperwork debacle that dealt the military a major embarrassment.

"We will get him," vowed Lt. Gen. James T. Conway, commander of the First Marine Expeditionary Force.

Traveling through this town, as well as the holy cities of Karbala and Najaf, Mr. Wolfowitz today heard from Iraqis as well as General Conway and his officers, that the region was relatively free of the security problems and deadly attacks against Americans in and around Baghdad.

In Baghdad today, an American serviceman was killed before dawn while guarding a bank on the outskirts. Four other G.I.'s were wounded in Baghdad when their vehicle was struck by a homemade bomb.

The soldier who was killed was assigned to the Army's First Armored Division. He was attacked at 1:30 a.m. with small-arms fire and a rocket-propelled grenade while guarding the Rasheed Bank, said Specialist Brian Sharkey, a military spokesman. The soldier, whose identity was not released, was taken to a military aid station, where he died.

The country's new Governing Council, after six days in session, failed to elect a president, The Associated Press reported. Instead, leadership will be shared by three of the 25 members, the report said.

Mr. Wolfowitz was greeted enthusiastically by people in the town, where the marines say they have worked closely with civic and religious leaders in what American military officials call the Shiite heartland. There are still fuel, electricity and water shortages, but the main streets of Karbala and Najaf bustled with activity.

In Najaf, Mr. Wolfowitz joined two dozen members of a fledgling town council at one of their meetings, and gave an impromptu lesson in American-style civics.

"I don't think you can have a free country without a free media," he said. "I'd be very, very careful about anything that prevents people from expressing their views."

It was clear that after only 48 hours in Iraq, Mr. Wolfowitz was beginning to grow weary of the laundry list, and perhaps the tone, of requests for services and aid from Iraqis officials he has met.

"The American people are committed to a successful Iraq," he said when asked if United States troops would pull out if someone other than President Bush was elected in November 2004, "so long as they believe you are committed to success."