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## **AFTEREFFECTS: PRISON GRAVEYARD; Threat Gone, Iraqis Unearth Hussein's Nameless Victims**

By IAN FISHER

First the gravedigger found some teeth. "Please, just barely scrape the sand," Adel Rahaif Hani, whose brother, Satter, was arrested as a political prisoner in 1995, begged the digger. "I'm worried he's just below this layer."

Mr. Hani came to a cemetery here today, like dozens of other Iraqis, not with the name of his dead brother but with a number. Satter's number was 535. A cousin, Sagur, arrested at the same time, was 537.

These numbers were what was left of people convicted as enemies of Saddam Hussein and then made to disappear. Their graves were not dignified with names but with numbers painted on metal plates. The plates spread like rusty weeds, covering more and more feet of desert every year Mr. Hussein held power.

But now that he is gone, the families of the disappeared are finding the numbers, matching them to the metal plates and finally collecting their dead.

These were people executed -- most by hanging in the fearsome Abu Ghraib prison a mile away - - merely because the government considered them a threat. Many were Shiite Muslims more active in their religion than the Sunni-dominated government felt it could tolerate.

"This is all because of Saddam!" shrieked Ali Majid al-Shamali, in tears, as he waved his arms at the long rows of graves marked with metal signs, well over 1,000 of them. "My brother! My brother!"

He sat on the ground and stroked the dirt on the grave of his only brother, Walid, arrested in October, 1993. A man from another family at the graveyard tried to comfort him. "You lost only one person?" the man asked. "We lost eight here."

Two women in black wailed. Both men started to cry.

"Why these innocent people?" Mr. Shamali yelled. "Why?"

The thousands of Iraqis executed as political prisoners -- more probably tens or hundreds of thousands -- might have been unidentified forever, except that the Hussein government, which was as bureaucratically efficient as it was cruel, kept records of most everyone it killed. These were not available to ordinary Iraqis. But now a new organization, the Committee for Free

Prisoners, says it has received millions of documents from the custodians of the nation's graveyards for executed political prisoners. The numbers are contained in these documents.

The head of the group, Ibrahim Raouf Idrisi, who says he spent 6 of his 35 years in prisons because he joined a Muslim party, has opened the records to family members to find what happened to their loved ones, and they are coming here every day.

Sitting today in the abandoned house in Baghdad of a Hussein general, whose rooms are now piled with fat green record books of torture and execution, Mr. Idrisi mused at the hundreds of millions of dollars Mr. Hussein spent jailing and killing his enemies. "If he had spent only half that money on the people, they would have loved him," he said. "He is a terrorist, the only terrorist in the universe."

The documents represent only a small part of what existed on cemeteries around Iraq, he said, before the government went on a spree of paper shredding in its last hours.

Much survived. Mr. Hani, for example, now has the death certificate of his brother, which states plainly that on Aug. 23, 1997 he was "executed by hanging."

A slightly broader picture of what happened has emerged from the chief gravedigger, just 21 years old. He is Muhammad Muslim Muhammad and he said he began digging graves here when he was 14 to fulfill his military service.

He said he received the bodies every Wednesday at about 11 a.m., after the weekly hangings at around 5 a.m. There were never fewer than nine bodies to bury. During one especially bad time in 2001, he said, the numbers rose. One day he buried 18 people. He said he had never told anyone the details of his job.

"I didn't open my mouth, or I would have ended up with these poor people here," he said.

The oldest graves in the cemetery, he said, date to 1983, four years after Mr. Hussein took power. The most recent, he said, was from six months ago, about the time that Mr. Hussein declared an amnesty for prisoners at Abu Ghraib as the threat of an attack by the United States rose.

He said he personally helped bury 700 people, but he has no idea how many bodies are in the cemetery, a walled-off part of the huge Islamic cemetery here. The area is sizable, measuring about 130 acres by 25 acres, which if full might hold more than 3,000 bodies.

Slowly, the area is emptying of corpses. In the two weeks since the government fell, the families have been coming, but they were not able to find their relatives until the documents were recovered. So far, Mr. Muhammad said, 80 bodies have been removed.

It is not easy, even for families who have the numbers. Today, a 40-year-old tailor named Hassan Jassim arrived with a scrap of paper scrawled with the number 849, which was supposed to mark the grave of his brother, Selim.

A student in the Hawsa, the Shiite religious school in Najaf, about 85 miles south of Baghdad, Selim was arrested in 1998 at the family's home in Baghdad. The military then destroyed the house.

What Mr. Jassim wanted was to provide his brother with a proper Islamic burial, in which the body is ritually washed and wrapped in white linen. But he could not find the grave: The numbers ran from 847 to 848, then skipped up to 853.

They decided to dig anyway. "Do you want me to dig up everything or just the head," the gravedigger asked. Mr. Jassim decided just to see the head, because he believed he could identify his brother by his two missing back teeth.

"There are so many graves that don't have numbers," he said. "We don't know what to do."

The dirt was dry and easily dug and soon the gravedigger held up a skull. "It's not him," Mr. Jassim said. "The teeth are complete."

At grave No. 444, a large family worked together to unearth Hamid Omran, who was 31 when he was arrested in 1994. As the family carefully lifted the bones onto fresh linen, his cousin, Farhan Jassim, 47, exploded in anger.

"I don't think there was a regime in the world that treated political prisoners the way Saddam did," he said. "You can't imagine such exaggerated injustice."

The jaw surfaced. Mr. Hussein, the cousin said, "hated every Iraqi. Believe me, he hated all Iraqis."

Then the family found the skull, which showed a crack in a temple. A guard kicked him when he was arrested, the family said.

Another cousin, Thaer Ghawi, 27, wept as he smoked a cigarette once the bones were out of the grave. "We are just people who opposed the regime," he said. "Why couldn't he just put political prisoners in prison?"

Mr. Hani, the man whose brother disappeared in 1995, spent three hours picking through the grave of his brother. It was laborious. After the teeth, a few small bones, perhaps from the feet or hands, were found. Finally, Mr. Hani had found enough to fill a small coffin. He did not find the skull.

"It is enough for me," he said as he loaded the coffin onto a truck. "I feel relieved. What worried me before was I didn't know if he was alive or dead. Now I know."