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## How Many People Has Hussein Killed?

By JOHN F. BURNS

In the unlit blackness of an October night, it took a flashlight to pick them out: rust-colored butchers' hooks, 20 or more, each four or five feet long, aligned in rows along the ceiling of a large hangar-like building. In the grimmest fortress in Iraq's gulag, on the desert floor 20 miles west of Baghdad, this appeared to be the grimmest corner of all, the place of mass hangings that have been a documented part of life under Saddam Hussein.

At one end of the building at Abu Ghraib prison, a whipping wind gusted through open doors. At the far end, the flashlight picked out a windowed space that appeared to function as a control room. Baggy trousers of the kind worn by many Iraqi men were scattered at the edges of the concrete floor. Some were soiled, as if worn in the last, humiliating moments of a condemned man's life.

The United States is facing a new turning point in its plans to go to war to topple Mr. Hussein, with additional American troops heading for the Persian Gulf, while France and Germany lead the international opposition. But the pressure President Bush has applied already has created chances to peer into the darkest recesses of Iraqi life.

In the past two months, United Nations weapons inspections, mandated by American insistence that Mr. Hussein's pursuit of banned weapons be halted, have ranged widely across the country. But before this became the international community's only goal, Mr. Bush was also attacking Mr. Hussein as a murdering tyrant. It was this accusation that led the Iraqi leader to virtually empty his prisons on Oct. 20, giving Western reporters, admitted that day to Abu Ghraib, a first-hand glimpse of the slaughterhouse the country has become.

In the end, if an American-led invasion ousts Mr. Hussein, and especially if an attack is launched without convincing proof that Iraq is still harboring forbidden arms, history may judge that the stronger case was the one that needed no inspectors to confirm: that Saddam Hussein, in his 23 years in power, plunged this country into a bloodbath of medieval proportions, and exported some of that terror to his neighbors.

Reporters who were swept along with tens of thousands of near-hysterical Iraqis through Abu Ghraib's high steel gates were there because Mr. Hussein, stung by Mr. Bush's condemnation, had declared an amnesty for tens of thousands of prisoners, including many who had served long sentences for political crimes. Afterward, it emerged that little of long-term significance had changed that day. Within a month, Iraqis began to speak of wide-scale re-arrests, and officials were whispering that Abu Ghraib, which had held at least 20,000 prisoners, was filling up again.

Like other dictators who wrote bloody chapters in 20th-century history, Mr. Hussein was primed for violence by early childhood. Born into the murderous clan culture of a village that lived off piracy on the Tigris River, he was harshly beaten by a brutal stepfather. In 1959, at age 22, he made his start in politics as one of the gunmen who botched an attempt to assassinate Iraq's first military ruler, Abdel Karim Kassem.

Since then, Mr. Hussein's has been a tale of terror that scholars have compared to that of Stalin, whom the Iraqi leader is said to revere, even if his own brutalities have played out on a small scale. Stalin killed 20 million of his own people, historians have concluded. Even on a proportional basis, his crimes far surpass Mr. Hussein's, but figures of a million dead Iraqis, in war and through terror, may not be far from the mark, in a country of 22 million people.

Where the comparison seems closest is in the regime's mercilessly sadistic character. Iraq has its gulag of prisons, dungeons and torture chambers — some of them acknowledged, like Abu Ghraib, and as many more disguised as hotels, sports centers and other innocent-sounding places. It has its overlapping secret-police agencies, and its culture of betrayal, with family members denouncing each other, and offices and factories becoming hives of perfidy.

"Enemies of the state" are eliminated, and their spouses, adult children and even cousins are often tortured and killed along with them.

Mr. Hussein even uses Stalinist maxims, including what an Iraqi defector identified as one of the dictator's favorites: "If there is a person, then there is a problem. If there is no person, then there is no problem."

There are rituals to make the end as terrible as possible, not only for the victims but for those who survive. After seizing power in July 1979, Mr. Hussein handed weapons to surviving members of the ruling elite, then joined them in personally executing 22 comrades who had dared to oppose his ascent.

The terror is self-compounding, with the state's power reinforced by stories that relatives of the victims pale to tell — of fingernail-extracting, eye-gouging, genital-shocking and bucket-drowning. Secret police rape prisoners' wives and daughters to force confessions and denunciations. There are assassinations, in Iraq and abroad, and, ultimately, the gallows, the firing squads and the pistol shots to the head.

DOING the arithmetic is an imprecise venture. The largest number of deaths attributable to Mr. Hussein's regime resulted from the war between Iraq and Iran between 1980 and 1988, which was launched by Mr. Hussein. Iraq says its own toll was 500,000, and Iran's reckoning ranges upward of 300,000. Then there are the casualties in the wake of Iraq's 1990 occupation of Kuwait. Iraq's official toll from American bombing in that war is 100,000 — surely a gross exaggeration — but nobody contests that thousands of Iraqi soldiers and civilians were killed in the American campaign to oust Mr. Hussein's forces from Kuwait. In addition, 1,000 Kuwaitis died during the fighting and occupation in their country.

Casualties from Iraq's gulag are harder to estimate. Accounts collected by Western human rights groups from Iraqi émigrés and defectors have suggested that the number of those who have "disappeared" into the hands of the secret police, never to be heard from again, could be 200,000. As long as Mr. Hussein remains in power, figures like these will be uncheckable, but the huge toll is palpable nonetheless.

Just as in Stalin's Russia, the machinery of death is mostly invisible, except for the effects it works on those brushed by it — in the loss of relatives and friends, and in the universal terror that others have of falling into the abyss. If anybody wants to know what terror looks like, its face is visible every day on every street of Iraq.

"Mindors," the men who watch visiting reporters day and night, are supposedly drawn from among the regime's harder men. But even they break down, hands shaking, eyes brimming, voices desperate, when reporters ask ordinary Iraqis edgy questions about Mr. Hussein.

"You have killed me, and killed my family," one minder said after a photographer for The New York Times made unauthorized photographs of an exhibition of statues of the Iraqi dictator during a November visit to Baghdad's College of Fine Arts. In recent years, the inexorable nature of Iraq's horrors have been demonstrated by new campaigns bearing the special hallmark of Mr. Hussein. In 1999, a complaint about prison overcrowding led to an instruction from the Iraqi leader for a "prison cleansing" drive. This resulted, according to human rights groups, in hundreds, and possibly thousands, of executions.

Using a satanic arithmetic, prison governors worked out how many prisoners would have to be hanged to bring the numbers down to stipulated levels, even taking into account the time remaining in the inmates' sentences. As 20 and 30 prisoners at a time were executed at Abu Ghraib and elsewhere, warders trailed through cities like Baghdad, "selling" exemption from execution to shocked families, according to people in Iraq who said they had spoken to relatives of those involved. Bribes of money, furniture, cars and even property titles brought only temporary stays.

MORE recently, according to Iraqis who fled to Jordan and other neighboring countries, scores of women have been executed under a new twist in a "return to faith" campaign proclaimed by Mr. Hussein. Aimed at bolstering his support across the Islamic world, the campaign led early on to a ban on drinking alcohol in public. Then, some time in the last two years, it widened to include the public killing of accused prostitutes.

Often, the executions have been carried out by the Fedayeen Saddam, a paramilitary group headed by Mr. Hussein's oldest son, 38-year-old Uday. These men, masked and clad in black, make the women kneel in busy city squares, along crowded sidewalks, or in neighborhood plots, then behead them with swords. The families of some victims have claimed they were innocent of any crime save that of criticizing Mr. Hussein.