

January 26, 2003

The World; The Killing of Iraq's Ancient Marsh Culture

By JOHN F. BURNS

OF all Iraq's ethnic groups, the marsh Arabs of the southern reaches of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers may have the strongest claim to be Saddam Hussein's most bludgeoned victims. They alone can claim to have had a 6,000-year-old culture dating back to the ancient Sumerians, as well as the wetlands that nurtured that culture, obliterated by Mr. Hussein. Theirs, Western human rights groups say, is a story of genocide.

The Kurds have been victims of purges and ethnic cleansing, forced in tens of thousands to flee their traditional homelands in the oil fields of the north. But they have found refuge in the self-governing enclave of northern Iraq, since 1991 a protectorate of American and British air power. And the Shiite Arabs, accounting for about 60 percent of Iraq's population of 22 million, have had scores of their most influential clerics murdered and their religious ceremonies suppressed.

But the marsh Arabs have virtually ceased to exist. The northern approach to the southern city of Basra, through the area where the wetlands used to be, is guarded by a huge portrait of Mr. Hussein in traditional marsh Arab dress. Behind him are the lagoons and islands, high-prowed canoes called mashhufs and hump-backed houses of latticework reeds called mudhifs, water-slick buffaloes and thriving waterfowl -- all characteristic of life in the marshes.

Mr. Hussein, like all totalitarian rulers, has worked to eliminate the very possibility of resistance, and this made the marsh dwellers his ineluctable enemy. Inhabiting an area of several thousand square miles accessible only by boat until the advent of the helicopter, the marshes were a traditional center of rebellion and banditry. The Turks, the Persians and the British came to know the men of the marshes through their raids on passing caravans and regiments and trains. In the Iran-Iraq war of the 1980's, the marshes were an infiltration route for Iraqi opposition militias based in Iran.

Suppressing a Shiite rebellion that followed the Persian Gulf war in 1991, Mr. Hussein bombed the marshland villages, some with napalm and chemical agents. Then, working from an old British plan to drain waters that were excessively salted or polluted, Mr. Hussein's battalions all but eliminated the wetlands over a six-month period in 1992, turning them into a dusty, uninhabitable desert. The United Nations has described the process as one of the world's greatest environmental disasters.

In the process, at least 100,000 of the 250,000 marsh Arabs were displaced within Iraq; an additional 40,000 fled to Iran. Reed beds were burned and remaining lagoons poisoned. Thousands of fugitives were rounded up, sent to army camps in the north and executed. Now, according to a report published by Human Rights Watch on Friday, the marsh Arabs face a new

disaster if their strategic homeland again becomes a battleground in a war between Iraq and American troops. JOHN F. BURNS

• [Copyright 2007 The New York Times Company](#)