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A Tyrant in the Shadows

By JOHN S. BURNETT

Residents of this village of mud huts know that Saddam Hussein even changed the weather. Under a vindictive Iraqi sun, the gale-force north wind sandblasts everything in its path. Crops no longer grow. Children in this parched community not far from the Iranian border huddle in the lee of a clay wall, unable to play. The temperature today is a suffocating 120 degrees.

It was not always thus. Before Saddam Hussein drained the marshlands to the north -- an area the size of New Jersey -- this little village was said to be green and quite pleasant, with temperatures rising only to the mid-90's. Just to the west, Basra, Iraq's second-largest city, enjoyed summers that were tolerable without air-conditioning. The changed climate is another reminder that Saddam Hussein remains alive in spirit and in deed, if not in fact.

Here to observe the distribution of goods under the waning oil-for-food program, I show the magic of a digital camera to the curious residents. It is an icebreaker; they've never seen anything like it. In broken English they express their desire to be welcoming, but they turn silent when I ask about the former dictator. They look across the dirt road at the desert, down at their shoes, at one another, and finally over at a small, neatly kept mud brick house -- as if someone there might be tuning in. A powerful dust devil cuts a swath through the village and scours us. The villagers disappear.

The reports that Saddam Hussein may be alive and hiding inside Iraq -- and inspiring his newly confident followers to attack and kill occupation soldiers -- have raced through this town as if carried by the desert's famous Shamal wind. The fear of the dictator's return is seared so deeply in the collective psyche that if the Pentagon were to announce DNA tests proving he is dead, few here would have the ability, the strength, to believe it. The specter of Saddam Hussein remains a powerful destabilizing force, robbing the people of a basic human right: freedom from fear.

Now there are other powerful forces at work, feeding other concerns, and the talk of anarchy is not far off the mark. I was a relief worker in Somalia after American troops withdrew in 1994, and I witnessed the brutal results of more than a decade of lawlessness. Anarchy is a firestorm that cannot be controlled, no matter how determined an occupying power is to set things right. Remove a dictator and watch chaos grow.

Freedom in Basra today is a heavyset man lying on a street corner at midday, mostly ignored by passers-by. Blood spreads on his white robes. My driver shrugs, saying that it is "only tasfiya," the Arabic word for purification or, in this case, liquidation. Vengeance happens every day now, he says. When police stations were looted, the clever thieves went for the files. So today, for \$50, you can buy the records that allege who killed your brother or father or uncle so many years ago. The blood feuds are well under way.

Lawlessness is endemic. Alongside the highway, boys scale electric poles with wire cutters (the electric cables have copper that can be sold) while their elders look on. To the south, in Umm Qasr, Iraq's only deep-sea port, young men climb atop trucks chartered by the World Food Program, casually tossing down 100-pound bags of flour to their friends waiting below, while a Spanish military unit guarding its ship stands by impotently only yards away. There is no police force of any note here -- and if a policeman had a gun and was to fire, he would just start his own interfamily war.

Back in Tanoonma, the locals predict that when coalition forces stop their desultory daylight patrols, as they are expected to do eventually, it will no longer be safe for foreigners in town. It is already dangerous for the local population.

Saddam Hussein's Republican Guard and fedayeen were supposed to put up a fight when the Americans and British invaded, but they stripped off their uniforms instead. They haven't disappeared. They are living among the locals and are recognized by the distinctive belt buckles that some still wear proudly.

Uday Hussein, the dictator's elder son, released tens of thousands of hardened criminals just before the war. He is said to have ordered them to disrupt civilian life, or what was left of it, to further rile the local populations and show that there would be no stability without his father. The ruling family is gone, the thugs are still here. Tightly organized gangs of looters -- most likely escaped prisoners in the employ of those still loyal to the regime -- have begun to concentrate on stealing weapons, a serious concern for security officials.

The Shiite majority here in the south, so oppressed by the Sunni Baathists, is gaining its revenge -- harassing Sunni women who do not wear head scarves and threatening Sunni intellectuals. Some fear that fundamentalist control of the south, backed by Iran, could result in ethnic cleansing of non-Shiites. Kreekour Manoukian, a member of the large Christian community near here, told me his church is afraid that when the coalition forces leave, the Shiites "will make excuses to punish, to steal, to kill."

At night, many of the streets are populated only by the random gangs that break into whatever home they please, often killing the occupants. So it is not surprising to hear many Iraqis reminisce bitterly but openly about the bad old days of Saddam Hussein.

Ali Khalil, an army veteran, told me he thought his prayers were answered when he was told the regime had fallen. But today, he is not so sure. Like so many others, Mr. Khalil now stays on the roof of his house at night cradling a loaded Kalashnikov. In this city with neighborhoods segregated by tribe, civilian militias -- a sort of Neighborhood Watch with assault rifles -- are organizing. As I saw in Somalia, militias are the foundation of greater power and less stability.

To Ali Khalil, Saddam Hussein will never die; the dictator's Iraq is the only home he has known. Some say they know neighbors who still have a photo of Mr. Hussein hidden away, just in case he returns.

John S. Burnett, author of "Dangerous Waters: Modern Piracy and Terror on the High Seas," is writing a book about relief workers in combat areas.

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