Washington Post:
In Iraq, Dead Men Tell Tales
Forensic Experts Dig in the Dirt For Crime Clues
By Sharon Waxman
Washington Post Staff Writer
Monday, July 7, 2003

NEAR HINDIYAH, Iraq --
The year is 1988. Across the blistering plain of the southern Iraqi desert, a line of men stands under the silent sky. There is nothing and no one for miles as they file forward under the prod of their armed guards, hands cuffed behind their backs. Harsh desert winds whip at their feet, with the jinn, the tall funnels of swirling sand believed by some to contain the genie, the only shape to mark the horizon.
There will be no magic genie for these men. They wear loose pants and matching tunics that identify them as Kurds, an ethnic group that does not live in the southern desert. Iraqi President Saddam Hussein has brought them here, probably from hundreds of miles away in the north, to be killed. Who knows for what crime, what misdemeanor?
One of the prisoners is still a teenager, 15 years old, or perhaps 16 or 17. His tunic is embroidered around the collar. Over an undershirt with green trim the bloodied cuffs of his white shirt stick to his metal handcuffs. A brown sash circles his waist, and he wears black leather shoes. Surely he is frightened. Surely he knows the inevitable will arrive. When it does come, death will be swift.
It's 15 years later and forensic archaelologist Ambika Flavel has come to the same spot to reconstruct that day. The 27-year-old Brit reaches into a flour sack and rummages around. She pulls out several ribs, a femur, a clavicle, and places them neatly on a brown blanket spread on the dusty desert floor. She finds and assembles the spinal column, each vertebra fitting snugly against the next. Then comes a jumble of small bones. "Foot," she says, placing one at the bottom of the blanket. "Foot." Flavel separates the fingers, the toes, yellowed bits of calcium that click as she gathers each into a small pile. She fishes out two metal circles, once handcuffs, with scraps of white cloth stuck to them.
The sun is punishingly hot -- 117 degrees -- but at least there is no stench today. The bodies at this mass grave have all skeletonized and Flavel does not wear gloves as she sorts through the bones.
"It's like a jigsaw puzzle," she remarks, neatly placing the hip bones above the legs. She checks off each piece on a chart: femur, tibia. Sometimes she finds a piece she can't identify as human; she licks it to be sure -- bone is porous, stone is not.
Here is the skull, not very large, with a small hole at the back and a slightly larger hole at the front. A bullet appears to have been shot into the back of the head at close range, and exited the front. An execution. She examines the teeth -- a wisdom tooth has not yet descended and the

teeth are still white. She peers at the elbow and the base of the spine and notes that key joints have not yet fused. The man killed here, she concludes, was as young as 15, probably no older than 17.

Observing this process, U.S. Army Col. Ed Burley walks over to scrutinize the skull. He places a pen through the hole to determine the trajectory of the bullet.

"It looks like a classic gunshot wound," he says, and he ought to know. In addition to being the head of the U.S.-led effort to assess and identify mass graves in Iraq, Burley, 42, is a criminal prosecutor in the U.S. attorney's office in Washington, D.C.

Burley and his group of six forensic experts, including Flavel, have been traveling the length and breadth of Iraq looking for where the bodies are buried. Guided by local tipsters and human rights activists who precede them, they dig up bones, uncover corpses and sift through sometimes-empty grave sites ransacked by families looking for missing relatives.

They do not seek to provide families with closure. That is someone else's job. They are looking, instead, for evidence of a crime. If they do their work properly, someday someone may well have to answer for these deaths. And history will record what happened here.

Which is why Burley is so enthusiastic about this new site near the tiny town of Hindiyah.

It sits more than a mile from any road, straight into the echoing maw of the desert, without so much as a dirt path to indicate that vehicles once came here loaded with men. Or that a front-loading bulldozer once rolled over the dunes at this spot to cut a straight edge five feet into the ground and form the hard-packed perimeter of a rectangular pit.

No families have been here to rake desperately through the ruins in hope of finding a shred of fabric, a watch, a tag, a name. As a crime scene, it is relatively pristine. And after just a few minutes of digging this morning, Burley and his team uncovered several bodies: two pairs of feet and a torso and skull in a couple of square feet -- bodies stacked one upon the other.

"A place like this," Burley had said earlier, as he bumped over the dusty plain in a GMC loaded with maps, a compass and a Global Positioning System unit, looking for the spot. "There's a lot of potential."

Laying the Groundwork

An estimated 290,000 people are missing and believed to be buried in mass graves throughout Iraq. In a country of 22 million, that is more than 1 percent of the population, the equivalent of about 3.5 million people in the United States. The vast majority of these bodies have not been found.

By comparison, forensic experts working in the former Yugoslavia estimated that "ethnic cleansing" left 30,000 dead in mass burial pits. It was there that the specialty of forensic archaeology emerged and proved its worth, as the careful evidence-gathering of experts was later used in trials that succeeded in convicting war criminals. In the Iraq war, the U.S. government did not wait long to recruit a group of forensic archaeologists with expertise in things like human anatomy and geophysics. Most of them are in

their twenties and come from universities around the globe or from other projects involving crimes of war. Since the fall of Saddam Hussein in April, these researchers have identified 80 to 100 mass graves in Iraq. The number depends upon how one counts, since some sites include several mass graves in close proximity.

The six people working near Hindiyah, veterans of Bosnian grave site excavations, are part of a British-based non-governmental organization called the Inforce Foundation, which investigates mass murder and genocide. Ian Hanson, an archaeologist based at Bournemouth University in Dorset, is the leader of the 11/2-year-old group, but he answers to Col. Burley, who -- with a handgun strapped to his thigh -- is responsible for their safety. The group also includes Tim Haynie, an Army major from the U.S. Space Command, who provides access to satellite photos, crucial for finding remote sites in the desert such as this one.

Their work is done quietly, usually away from the eyes of the media, always with several armed guards. Death threats are not uncommon in this line of work (though so far not in Iraq). Sometimes mass graves are mined.

While Burley is all straight-arrow soldier, a stolid, balding man with a pug nose, a round face and a deep sense of religious conviction, Hanson, 34, is the cool-tempered scientist, part adventurer, part historian, with a deep tan and a deeper sense of irony. He has been known to evince gasps from bystanders when he pulls out a sandwich at lunchtime, in full view of the skeletons. He claims to no longer notice the sickly sweet smell of human remains.

Yet he is quietly passionate about his work. "Every site we go to people tell you about another couple of sites," Hanson says. Frequently volunteer diggers find clues, such as empty shell casings, that can confirm a particular time period. "At one site a guy came up to me and said he had found a . . . watch," Hanson said. "It had stopped at March 4." The year is still a mystery.

For the moment the role of Inforce is not to excavate, merely to identify the sites of mass graves. This usually involves the excavation of one or two bodies, interviews of local witnesses and ordering satellite photos from before and after the presumed dates of executions. The photos are used to look for disturbances of earth and for concentrations of vehicles, both signs of executions and burial.

Once identified, the site is marked off-limits and locals are asked not to touch it. In some places the exhortation works, as in the Shiite south where a fatwa has forbidden exhumation. In other places, local volunteers show up unexpectedly to dig on behalf of families. Either way, full excavation by experts will happen no sooner than a year from now, after international groups prepare the work and arrive in larger numbers. The job of Inforce is to provide those people with an overall image of the scope of their job: making the case for mass murder.

"We're trying to look at a cross section of the major events of people disappearing," says Hanson. "The Kurds in 1988, the uprising of 1991, the

uprising of 1998. If you're gathering evidence for criminal prosecution, you try to aim for a sample [of each], to get a view of the overall disappearances."

Some graves contain a few dozen bodies. Others -- like one in Hilla in southern Iraq -- contained 5,000, exhumed to the anguished cries of local residents. Four thousand of those men have been identified so far as Shiite rebels, all of them executed: eyes blindfolded, hands tied behind the back, gunshot wounds to the head.

But in the case of Hilla, the forensic experts arrived well after the families, and there was little they could do to reconstruct the crime. The Inforce archaeologists have tried to train local volunteers to exhume bodies without disturbing evidence, to lift a skeleton carefully so the wrists stay bound, so the blindfold stays on the skull. Absent the emotion and the pressure of grieving families, it is no different from the way cultural archaeologists work -- with tiny trowels, small brushes, a flashlight and lots of patience.

"We're like paleontologists," says Hanson. "It's like uncovering Tyrannosaurus rex."

'Doing This for a Reason'

Arriving at the desert site, archaeologist Roland Wessling pulls out what appears to be a giant metal detector. Local Bedouins are crouched around a large pit, above which is a sign in Arabic: "This cemetery belongs to our dearest Kurdish people by supervision of the human rights organization, Karbala branch. No entrance." A half-dozen flour sacks containing bones sit at the bottom of the pit.

"A month ago I found this grave," says Muhammad Abdel Wahid, who lives in a mud hut nearby. The 35-year-old subsistence farmer and his family have lived here since 1993, barely 300 yards from the mound of earth covering the corpses. "A friend of mine, a shepherd, mentioned to me he knew there was a grave here. So after we saw the mass graves on TV, we came and dug here and found the bodies," he says.

The locals dug up 11 bodies and placed them in the flour sacks. They then notified a human rights office in Karbala, which in turn notified Bill Hegelin, a doctor from Physicians for Human Rights who is traveling around Iraq investigating mass grave sites. Hegelin looked at the bodies, ordered the sign erected, and notified Burley.

Wessling is usually the first to work a new site. Today he sets up five parallel strings, each 50 yards long, then passes his detector -- it is actually ground-penetrating radar -- over each string. He is feeding information to a computer set off to one side, looking for objects beneath the ground or, more important, for changes in density in the earth.

"It's a bit like an X-ray machine," Wessling explains. On the screen, parallel layers of earth are reflected in strata of red and blue, but after the first couple of feet the image becomes fuzzy.

"A half-meter down, the earth starts to be disturbed," Wessling says, pointing at the screen. "At two meters you really see disturbances. I can't

say if there are bodies there, but I can say the soil has been disturbed."
Using the radar, Wessling is able to find the edges of the grave, and to see if other graves are nearby. But in this heat the work is not easy. Bedouin children crowd around the monitor. After an hour or so the fuses on the detector blow. The heat is withering, making you feel like you must talk softly and breathe lightly to conserve energy.
"There was talk of postponing this until August because of the heat," says Wessling, pausing to gulp some bottled water. "But we insisted. We want to get to the sites as quickly as possible." Then he checks himself. "As a scientist I must remain as neutral as possible. One has to try not to get emotional."
Hanson is lying on his stomach, halfway into the pit where he and Burley have been uncovering a few more skeletons. He carefully clears around an exposed ankle bone with his hands. Then he scrapes around a shoe with a trowel. His best guess is that these bones date from 1988, when Saddam Hussein murdered tens of thousands of Kurds, many by poison gas, many others through mass executions.
"He would bus them down in cattle cars, trucks, then keep them on military bases and execute them down here," says Burley. Sometimes the prisoners would be kept for weeks at a time, moved from place to place, and then without warning driven to the desert and shot. The purpose of the campaign was to reduce the growing numbers of Kurds in Iraq, who posed a long-term threat to Hussein in their demands for independence.
"Of all the cases I've seen, this is the closest I've seen to genocide," says Burley. "They certainly bused them a long way to kill them."
Flavel tries not to think about the implications of her work as she sorts through the remains of her unknown teenager. "In Bosnia the bodies were fleshed," she says. "But you get over it. You know you're doing this for a reason, and that gets you through it." She sits up from her sorting of bones. "When people tell you, 'I lost my brother,' and tears are running down their face, there's pressure, isn't there? You want to do something. And you know you can't help everyone."
Pressure and responsibility.
Wahid, the farmer, watches the archaeologists working. He says: "Whenever we discuss the mass graves we feel anger, and sorrow for the people. These crimes -- even Hitler did not do this. Women, children, this is more than Hitler did."
The farmer may not know all the facts about World War II. But he knows what happened in Iraq, particularly after this region rebelled against Saddam Hussein in 1991.
"You retreated. You left us," he says. "You didn't support us." He is referring to the decision by the U.S. government not to come to the aid of Iraqis who rebelled against Hussein after the first Gulf War in 1991. Wahid looks at the grave, at a pair of sneakers. It does not matter that this particular grave is from 1988.
"There are hundreds of mass graves like this, from 1991," he says. "If you

had just left protection for us, this wouldn't have happened."
Eventually Iraqis will take over this process. They will need to establish a database of missing persons, to cross-reference it with the bodies found in the graves. There is talk of using DNA to identify remains.
Will there be justice?
Wahid thinks about this question for a long while before speaking, and he doesn't answer the question. "This will not be forgotten by history," he says.