

Bitter Homecoming For Iraqi Kurds

By Sharon Waxman
THE WASHINGTON POST

KIRKUK, Iraq — Living in a soccer stadium has its down side.

The press box, which some now call home, is at the top of the stadium, so every trek to the kiosk that sells gum and cigarettes is a five-story hike down steep, broken stairs. A trip to the outhouse is another walk down those same stairs.

But the worst part is the water. With only one hose available for all 700 people living in the stadium, there's always a wait. And it's a chore to haul the jerrycans up the narrow stairs.

Plus, the water's not the best. The people here say a baby died recently of diarrhea.

But Medea Nazim, 13, manages to stay cheery, since that's her nature. "I go to school," she says in enthusiastic English, exhausting her vocabulary. And there are always plenty of kids around to play with. Medea is tiny for her age, and wears a denim shirt and green sweat pants. Dimples make charming creases in her brown skin when she smiles, which is often, and her brown eyes dance.

Most of the people in Shorja Stadium aren't as upbeat as Medea. About 150 families have sought shelter in this bullet-pocked, looted building since the end of the war, all of them Kurds who were expelled from this northern city by Iraqi President Saddam Hussein.

They returned to their homes to find them occupied by Arab families or gone completely — bulldozed by the former government. Some were chased from their homes in the southern Arab communities where they'd resettled; others couldn't pay the rent in the economic privation of postwar Iraq.

Now all they do is wait. "We have gone to all the officials and no one is responding," says Sabah Mohamed Ibrahim, 40, the unofficial spokesman for the families living along the field, up in the press box, in the concrete hallways where they've hung sheets and patchwork rice sacks as separa-

tors. "This place is for sports, not for living. Twenty people here need operations." He kicks at a spigot near the playing field, where a rooster struts. Broken glass is everywhere. "A humanitarian organization brought us two tanks of water. They promised to turn it on. There's been nothing until now."

The families living in Shorja Stadium are just one example of a problem affecting thousands of families in northern Iraq. All over the major cities of Kirkuk and Mosul, displaced Arab and Kurdish families camp in abandoned buildings, waiting for someone to assign them some land, or to dislodge the people living in what were once their homes.

"I'm not saying they don't need help, but we've not totally ignored them either."

— Lt. John Evans
U.S. Army

In a bombed-out Mosul military base, dozens of Arab families expelled by Kurds wither in the heat. Everywhere a visitor goes in Kirkuk, angry Kurds wave documents in your face, the deeds to the homes they once legally owned.

"We are the original owners. We are not guilty, we did not do anything," said Sabr Ahmed Said, 45, an engineer who is organizing 200 families to demand the restitution of a mostly empty lot that once held their homes. Chickens peck at the ground where he stands. He says it was once the room where he was married.

Said appears to be stating the obvious, but no one, it seems, is willing to address the matter. The Americans are reluctant to evict people and want to wait until a local government can consider competing claims. The United Nations says that internally displaced persons don't fall under its mandate.

Relief organizations say they cannot do more without cash, and permission from the Americans.

In the meantime, days turn to weeks turn to months of blazing summer heat. Conditions worsen in shelters like the stadium.

Medea finishes school this week. Then, like the adults, she'll have nothing to do.

U.S. Army 1st Lt. John Evans, a cop from New York on reserve duty, looks dismayed when he learns of the reported death of another child at Shorja Stadium. It would be the third in two months. (A humanitarian organization investigated the death and found recent graves, but said none of them was child-size.)

"We've been trying to get groups in there to improve conditions," he says. "We have had health teams go in there. I'm not saying they don't need help, but we've not totally ignored them either."

Evans is the man in charge at the Civilian Military Operations Center in Kirkuk, a small building beside the gutted former headquarters of Iraqi intelligence, where the U.S. occupation deals with humanitarian problems. Initially, the Army wanted to move the Kurdish families from the stadium, he says. But then they thought again: If they placed the families somewhere comfortable, that might attract dozens of new families. And then what?

The authorities decided to leave the families where they were and not to improve conditions at the stadium too much for fear of attracting still more refugees. "If you build something, it becomes a permanent structure, and that becomes another problem," Evans says.

He acknowledges that there has been no progress on the stickier issue of land redistribution. The complexities of sorting out decades of ethnic repression are something the U.S. authorities here have decided is beyond their capacity.

Whoever sorts it out has a monumental task. Throughout his rule, Saddam regularly emptied villages of Kurds in an attempt to create a more



Above: Despite the bleak surroundings, a Kurdish boy skips down a corridor at Shorja Stadium, where 700 homeless people now reside. Below: Young and old make the most of the bullet-pocked stadium. For children, the end of the school year means there will be even less to do.

Arab population in the north, where a strong Kurdish separatist movement threatened his rule.

Arab families have been living in some of these homes for a decade or more. If they are evicted, they, too, need somewhere to go. Evans waves at boxes filled with claims by families to recoup houses occupied by others: 1,300 in Kirkuk so far.

"Our instructions are to take all claims, record them, keep a copy (of the deed) and give it to a deputy mayor who is charged with resettlement," he says. As of yet, there is no such deputy mayor. "Down the road it will be taken over by a civil organization to mediate, or to the judicial system."

The United Nations has decades of experience dealing with displaced persons. But "on property issues, the U.N. was not asked and is not man-

dated to intervene," says Mada Allaoui, the local U.N. representative for humanitarian aid. "We do monitor the situation."

Allaoui agrees with the U.S. approach of limiting aid to the stadium families. "Most of these people don't own property," he says. Encouraging others like them to return would be "The situation does not appear suitable to have people return in a weak economic situation. If you have a large assistance, then you aggravate the problem."



PHOTOS BY MICHAEL ROBINSON-CHAVEZ • WASHINGTON POST

Pilot's relatives say goodbyes to fallen hero

WASHINGTON (AP) — Gayle Herrick Holt was 15 when frightening news reached the family home in San Antonio. Her father, Charles G. Herrick, had been shot down in a cargo plane in faraway Laos.

It was September 1963 and Laos, while officially neutral, had become a focus of U.S. covert operations against communist rebel forces allied with the North Vietnamese army. The U.S. government — which kept secret the fact that Herrick was flying a CIA-owned plane — told Holt's mother, Margaret Louise, only that her husband was presumed to have died in the crash.

Years passed. No body was recovered, no details were offered.

And for Gayle Holt, the tragedy had no finality.

"In my mind there was always a question: Is he alive? Is he not alive?" she recalled.

Seven days after the crash, a headline in her hometown newspaper in San Antonio said he "may be alive."

Herrick was not alive, but that reality did not reach Holt until May 2000 when, out of the blue, her family got a telephone call from the U.S. Army Central Identification Laboratory in Hawaii. A bone recovered from the crash site in Laos might be her father's.

"It was a neat, neat shock" to finally learn the truth, she said.

On Wednesday, after nearly 40 years and two U.S. excavations of the crash site, Herrick's remains will be buried at Arlington National Cemetery in a ceremony with full military honors.

"This to me is a celebration," Holt said in a telephone interview from her home in Modesto, Calif., before flying to Hawaii to take possession of the remains. "He's home finally. He's where he belongs."

Herrick was flying for Air America, an airline based in Taiwan that was secretly owned by the CIA. It was used to deliver weapons, food and supplies to Laotian regular forces as well as Hmong tribesmen who were enlisted for guerrilla operations in communist-held areas of Laos.

The remains of Herrick and Joseph Cheney, the pilot-in-command on that fateful mission in 1963, were recovered over a period of years starting in 1989 and finally identified in the past year. Among the items found at the crash site was a radio microphone marked with Herrick's initials.

Herrick and Cheney are, respectively, the second and third Air America civilian fliers — of approximately 100 who perished in Laos from 1957 to 1974 — to have their remains recovered, positively identified and returned to their families, according to Pentagon and Air America records.

The first was Lowell Z. Pirkle, a flight mechanic who was shot down over Laos Aug. 3, 1967; his remains were identified in 1998.

Herrick had been flying missions over Laos for less than a year from a base at the capital, Vientiane, when his C-46 Commando plane was shot down on Sept. 5, 1963. The mission was to airdrop bags of rice and buffalo meat to Laotian soldiers. He was 44 years old.

It is not clear Herrick knew he was working for the CIA, since he was not a staff employee; most of Air America's hires were told the airline was property of the Pacific Corp., but they were not told that Pacific Corp. was a CIA front company.

The CIA did not publicly acknowledge the wartime role of Air America and its predecessor, Civil Air Transport, until June 2001, when it issued citation awards to former employees.

One year after the Vietnam War ended in 1975, Air America disbanded and its planes were sold.

Herrick was born in Buffalo and grew up in Lockport, N.Y. He played semiprofessional ice hockey in Canada before he enlisted in the U.S. military in 1943. He flew supply missions in the China-Burma-India theater — in support of Chinese troops fighting on the side of the Allies against Japan — during World War II.

The family's scant records of Herrick's military career indicate he flew in the Korean War at the rank of Air Force captain and was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross. When that conflict ended in 1953, he switched to the Air Force Reserve until he retired as a major in April 1963.

When Herrick joined Air America in 1962 he was sent to its main base in Taiwan. His wife and two children in San Antonio were going to join him in January 1963, but that plan was scrapped when Herrick was transferred to Vientiane.

Michael LaDue, a former assistant chief of aerial delivery for Air America, remembers Herrick in Laos and estimates they flew together on about 10 missions to drop food, fuel and sometimes weapons, mostly to Hmong tribesmen.

Herrick was a quiet professional who aspired to move up from co-pilot to command pilot, LaDue said.

"He had the right amount of self-assurance," LaDue said in a telephone interview last week from his home in Lee's Summit, Mo.

It is not clear who shot down Herrick's unarmed, twin-engine plane, but LaDue thinks it most likely was North Vietnamese soldiers. The plane was loaded with rice and meat for delivery to soldiers of the regular Lao army at Ban Houei Sane, a village in southern Laos a few miles from the

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POLICE BLOTTER

CSPD

6/23 12:25 a.m. Warrant arrest, 2007 Texas.

6/23 1:15 a.m. Traffic arrest (no driver's license), 2100 Harvey Mitchell.

6/23 3:59 a.m. Warrant arrest, 134 Luther.

6/23 4:10 a.m. Warrant arrest, 134 Luther.

6/23 4:11 a.m. Warrant arrest, 134 Luther.

6/23 8:23 a.m. Burglary of a vehicle, 1401 Rudder Freeway S. Taken: two amplifiers, two speakers, speaker box.

6/23 9:05 a.m. Burglary of a vehicle, 3900 SH 6 S. Taken: drills.

6/23 10:08 a.m. Warrant arrest, 2518 Dartmouth.

6/23 11:00 a.m. Burglary of a vehicle, 400 Nagle. Taken: CD player.

6/23 1:33 p.m. Warrant arrest, 2500 Central Park.

6/23 9:10 p.m. Aggravated assault, 112 Holleman. No injuries.

6/23 11:53 p.m. Warrant arrest, 2611 Texas.

6/24 4:04 a.m. Warrant arrest, 301 E 26th.

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placard violation, PA 50. Placard was seized and a citation was issued.

6/20 7:51 a.m. Warrant arrest, West Main Drive. Fine was paid and the subject was released.

6/20 12:27 p.m. Possession of marijuana and drug paraphernalia, McKenzie Terminal.

Marijuana and paraphernalia were discovered during a routine bag inspection. The subject was arrested and taken to the Brazos County Jail.

6/21 12:55 a.m. Disorderly conduct (fighting), Hobby Hall entrance. A subject was kicked in the face and struck several times with a belt. Suspect arrested and transported to Brazos County Jail.

6/22 1:02 p.m. Burglary of a motor vehicle, University Apartments. One stereo stolen.

6/18 5:00 p.m. Supplemental information, animal bite. A rabies test results were negative.

6/19 8:39 a.m. Credit card abuse, Administration building. Unauthorized purchases were made using a TAMU state credit card. Investigation continues.

6/19 11:01 a.m. Handicapped placard violation, PA 50. Placard was seized and a citation was issued.

6/19 1:36 p.m. Handicapped

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