

Iraqi citizens must have both eyes open: one looking to the future, and the other looking to the past.

—Dr. Rafid al-Husseini
President of the Society for the Preservation of Mass Graves

Introduction

The discovery of mass graves in Iraq graphically testifies to the brutality of Saddam Hussein's regime and the challenges of building a more pluralistic and law-based state. Both the dead and the living are victims of the crimes that are buried in these graves. We cannot bring back the hundreds of thousands of missing Iraqis. However, identification of as many bodies as possible and accountability for the circumstances of their deaths will enable the Iraqis to move forward to build a society that respects and protects fundamental human rights and dignity.

Mass Graves

Mass graves in Iraq are characterized as unmarked sites containing at least six bodies. Some can be identified by mounds of earth piled above the ground or as deep pits that appear to have been filled. Some older graves are more difficult to identify, having been covered by vegetation and debris over time. Sites have been discovered in all regions of the country



Examination of mass grave sites by the coalition team and local Iraqis. CPA photo



An Iraqi woman mourns next to remains of bodies exhumed from a mass grave. AP photo

and contain members of every major religious and ethnic group in Iraq as well as foreign nationals, including Kuwaitis and Saudis. Over 250 sites have been reported, of which approximately 40 have been confirmed to date. Over 1 million Iraqis are believed to be missing in Iraq as a result of executions, wars, and defections, of whom hundreds of thousands are thought to be in mass graves.

Most of the graves discovered to date correspond to one of five major atrocities perpetrated by the regime.

- The 1983 attack against Kurdish citizens belonging to the Barzani tribe, 8,000 of whom were rounded up by the regime in northern Iraq and executed in deserts at great distances from their homes.
- The 1988 Anfal campaign, during which as many as 182,000 people disappeared. Most of the men were separated from their families and were executed in deserts in the west and southwest of Iraq. The remains of some of their wives and children have also been found in mass graves.
- Chemical attacks against Kurdish villages from 1986 to 1988, including the Halabja attack, when the Iraqi Air Force dropped sarin, VX and tabun chemical agents on the civilian population, killing 5,000 people immediately and causing long-term medical problems, related deaths, and birth defects among the progeny of thousands more.
- The 1991 massacre of Iraqi Shi'a Muslims after the Shi'a uprising at the end of the Gulf War, in

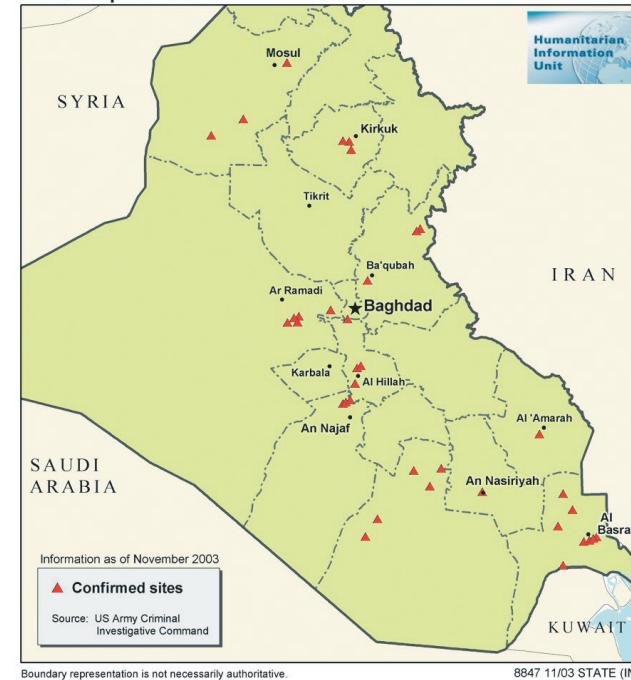
which tens of thousands of soldiers and civilians in such regions as Basra and Al-Hillah were killed.

- The 1991 Kurdish massacre, which targeted civilians and soldiers who fought for autonomy in northern Iraq after the Gulf War.

Opponents and critics of the regime from all religious and ethnic groups were also executed and buried in mass graves. Many of these are believed to be located at or near prisons and former military establishments.

These crimes have acquired a measure of notoriety and salience. Thousands of other Iraqis, including Marsh Arabs, Shi'a Muslims in the 1970s and 1980s, and students involved in uprisings in Najaf in 1999 may also be lying in mass graves in Iraq.

IRAQ: Reported Mass Grave Sites



Mass Grave Strategic Plan

The Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA), in cooperation with the interim Iraqi Human Rights Ministry, is implementing a program to identify remains in the graves and collect evidence of past atrocities for future prosecutions. These objectives address the needs of grieving families and the demands of accountability and justice. The program was developed in consultation with Iraqi specialists, international human rights groups, and renowned forensic experts.

Public Awareness and Education

The first phase of the plan, carried out in the first weeks after the war, addressed the need for public awareness and education. Military and CPA investigators, attorneys and forensic experts engaged in extensive efforts to collect, coordinate and verify information on reported mass graves. In addition, the media, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and local and religious leaders helped alert Iraqis to the importance of the sites and the need to preserve them undisturbed, and encouraged individuals to come forward with information about suspected sites. When necessary, military and civilian teams deployed to key sites to assist local leaders counsel patience and encourage orderly methods of recovery. Limited training was provided to mitigate damage to sites overrun by an emotional population, including:

Anthropological exhumation of remains by coalition team member. Photo: CPA Team



- How to conduct careful and detailed examinations of personal effects
- How to systematically record identified remains
- Why it is important to provide death certificates
- How to organize a reburial plot in a dignified manner
- How to conduct witness interviews and document information found at the site

The initial “rush to the graves” by grieving Iraqi families quickly slowed, and reports indicate that only 11 of the hundreds of known sites were disturbed.

Evidence Gathering and Forensic Site Assessment

The second step of the plan involves formally gathering evidence. The forensic site assessment involves gathering information such as precise location, number of remains in the grave, approximate date of the grave, origin of victims and other information on site condition such as soil, weather and logistical needs.

In May, the International Center of Excellence for the Investigation of Genocide, a British NGO, contracted with the British government to work with the CPA to develop standard protocols to govern the forensic work. INFORCE experts also performed 15 initial forensic site assessments. Since then, teams from Denmark, the United Kingdom and the United States have performed forensic site assessments in coordination with the CPA Forensic Team. The Finnish government plans to send a team in January 2004.

Exhumations

Of the sites that are assessed, the current plan is to select between 8 and 20 for full exhumation consistent with the following criteria:

- The site must be illustrative of a specific crime or period of atrocity, as outlined above
- It must be generally undisturbed and have probative value as evidence for a crime against

humanity, for example, evidencing bullet holes in 100 skulls

- The local population must consent to exhumation and related measures to secure the site

International teams will conduct the exhumations and, whenever possible, work alongside Iraqis to train them to conduct future exhumations themselves. The Swedish government has expressed willingness to donate a tenting system to house forensic teams on-site during their work.



Local Iraqis examining remains. CPA photo

Training and Iraqi Involvement

To successfully implement the mass graves strategy and, more generally, arrive at an accounting of the victims of the regime, Iraqi involvement is necessary. Iraqis from all regions have expressed their desire to participate in the process in order to show progress as quickly as possible. Accordingly, programs are under way to train Iraqis in community-led exhumations, with a focus on humanitarian identification of the missing. This will enable Iraqis to conduct and participate in exhumations of those mass graves not selected for full forensic exhumation by international teams.

Longer-term specialized training for expert personnel in forensic exhumation and investigation is also being planned, based upon recent assessments of Iraq’s forensic capacity. Selected Iraqi doctors and archaeologists are currently receiving initial training

on humanitarian identification procedures, but there is a great need for additional training to ensure that remains are handled in a dignified manner. Iraqi medical examiners will need international assistance, training, and funding to rehabilitate and equip Iraqi forensic labs.

Identification of the Missing and Justice

Mass graves provide many answers. They tell the story of what happened to loved ones—and they corroborate the beliefs about who was accountable. These answers are essential for promoting reconciliation and justice.

Iraqis are currently discussing how to create an Iraqi Bureau of Missing Persons or similar entity to centralize information on missing persons found at mass graves, in documents (such as execution orders), and through witness testimony.

Iraqis are also discussing how they will prosecute the perpetrators of crimes against humanity and war crimes in Iraq through an Iraqi-led process assisted and supported by the international community.



Examination of evidence by CPA member. CPA photo

The photos in this brochure were taken at various mass graves locations in Iraq and are strong evidence of Saddam Hussein’s brutality.

Cover: A child’s garment found in a shallow grave. CPA photo

Mass Graves in Iraq:



Uncovering Past Atrocities



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