



The Kurdish Calamity

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There are normally 50 million people living in Iran. For more than a decade this included 2.35 million Afghan, 500,000 Iraqi asylum seekers and 1 and 2 million internally displaced people making Iran host to the largest refugee population in the world. Within a few days of April 2nd this year, that population grew by a further million and a half, as Iran absorbed a massive outflow of refugees from Iraq as the result of a wave of repression following the Gulf War.

On 17 April an Australian television crew flew to Iran to film the crisis engulfing the country. The international media had been focusing for two weeks on the horrifying situation of those Kurds stranded in the mountains on the Iraqi/Turkish border. Aid had begun to reach them. The world's gaze was focused there.

Media silence seemed to surround those in Iran, or straddling its border with Iraq, though UNCHR updates indicated a refugee population of up to three times the size of that on the Turkish border. If the media was at this stage absent, the chances were that significant international aid was, as well. This was the story we went to film. "Quite possibly the worst refugee crisis in recent history - for two reasons - scale and speed" was the summation of Omar Bakhet, Charge' de Mission for UNHCR's Tehran office. When we interviewed him, he'd just returned from a meeting with Mme. Danielle Mitterand, the French President's wife, well known for her dedication to the Kurdish cause and a welcome international observer in this largely unobserved tragedy.

Despite the undoubted genuineness of Mme. Mitterand's concern and that of the French Government and people, Mr. Bakhet had broken off an exhausting daily schedule of "crisis management" in Tehran to ask her, perhaps as a symbolic representative of the international allies who had conducted a successful military operation defending the liberty of half a million Kuwaitis, why the world community could not join forces as efficiently, to save the lives of millions of Kurds, Shia's and Assyrian Christians fleeing the same tyrant. It was a question which we heard over and over again as we travelled throughout West Azerbaijan Province for the next week, filming a refugee tragedy as it unfolded, before the world was able to react. It was also the question we took away from Iran, largely unanswered. At the outset of the Gulf conflict, the United Nations Regional Humanitarian Plan of Action had allowed for a possible 400,000 refugees resulting from that war. UNHCR drew up a budget needed to keep them alive for three months. While the world community responded energetically to the funding of the military exercise in the gulf, the humanitarian budget was largely ignored. The planning figure was necessarily scaled down to 35,000. As the war drew to a close, the refugee outflow which relief agencies had dreaded no longer seemed a threat. UNHCR staff mused on the financial cost of that international conflict. The first day's aerial bombardment of Baghdad was some \$US640 million. UNHCR's entire annual budget, in 1990, to assist 15 million refugees was only \$US530 million.

Suddenly in the first week of April, we were to witness very graphically the human cost of this paradox. Suddenly within a few days there were no longer

“planning figures” of 35, 000, but a very real million and half men women and children on the move, many struggling across snow and ice covered mountains on foot, with only the light clothing in which they fled. They looked to the international community to save them. In the first instance that responsibility fell to the Iranian Government and to the UNHCR. Although a quantity of emergency provisions, tents, tarpaulins, medical supplies had been propositioned DURING the Gulf conflict when the exodus began, neither the Iranian authorities nor UNHCR possess the human or financial resources to deal with a crisis on this scale: expertise yes, but money, vehicles, staff, fuel, enough food, and blankets - NO. And none were more aware of this gap, than those on the “frontline”. Pierre Vignet, a UNHCR field officer based in the provincial capital of Orimiyeh in Northern Iran said in despair when we asked him describe his work, “We are six. UNHCR has only six field staff in Iran,” this in week three of the crisis; two mobile teams of 3 to cover eight border crossings and thousands of kilometres, Their job was to monitor the protection of this million and a half people, to coordinate the sudden presence of a multiplicity of western non governmental organizations in Iran and to work with the Iranian Government and provincial authorities in this first phase of the emergency to channel all available health and nutritional assistance to a population battling to survive. In such cases, UNHCR is meant to provide coordination expertise, but the next time we were to see Pierre after our filming was complete, he was about to get into a truck and to hand out bread himself, where he could. There was no one else to do it. It reminded me of a moment a few days earlier, in the windswept mountain pass of Hazi Omran, a border crossing above Piranshar where for 100 kilometres back into Iran, the vast assortment of vehicles of those Kurds fleeing towns like Kirkuk which had been bombed, had to a dead halt. There is an illusion that someone in a car is basically safe. But where there is no food, water or sanitation and the nights are freezing and you have been here for up to two weeks, you will die in a car as surely as anywhere else. Just inside the Iranian border at this crossing there were 3 small tents erected by Medecins du Mond. We had heard that hundreds of children a night were dying here, and were being buried in the strangely beautiful mountain valleys, so we felt a huge relief to see medical assistance here at all.

When we filmed inside one of the tents, we saw one young French woman doctor work with infinite patience to save the lives, through simple oral rehydration, of three Kurdish babies. She knew that outside the tent were thousands of ill and starving people, “it's better than nothing” she said of her efforts. In this first agonizing and disordered phase of an overwhelming humanitarian crisis when a lack of resources can paralyse, Pierre Vignet, the Quebecois field officer for UNHCR and this young French woman are the international community, or at least as much of it as many of the Kurds will ever see. They deserve more support from us.

At the time of writing, the crisis is in its second month in Iran. A small amount of aid from the Japanese government, the Norwegians and the European Community began to arrive late in April. For the first time in a decade, an American plane load of aid has landed in Tehran. Non government organizations have also begun to appear to support the efforts, from the beginning, of the Iranian Red

Crescent Society: Medecins du Monde, Mediciens San Frontieres, the International Committee of the Red Cross, and as we left, Oxfam and the Save the Children Fund.

UNHCR's presence has, largely due to the generous support of Denmark, Norway and Sweden, been significantly expanded: 27 field officers have been dispatched to help distribute relief assistance. As at May 10, 82 UNHCR staff have been deployed in Iran with another 66 on the way. There is planning underway for a possible ass repatriation.

This is not to say that conditions in Iran are not still desperate. This international relief community, despite the best efforts of an impoverished Iranian Government which is spending \$US10 million a day - this crisis still represents a handful of people trying to keep more than 2 million alive. As the spring comes, disease, notable cholera, will replace exposure as the principal killer of those living under plastic sheeting in the mountains, or on the streets in the overwhelmed border towns of Iran. After one month of urgent international appeals, there are still nowhere near enough tents blankets, medicines or food for the Kurds. UNHCR needs \$US400 million; it has received \$US94.3 million.

In the three weeks since we left Iran, UNHCR has been able to gather some crucial support. We are left with the question, however, of how many of the children dying at a rate of two thousand a night might have been saved if that support had been faster i coming. Our film crew watched many children die. The most horrifying aspect of this was that we knew from looking at them that a few weeks earlier, they had been healthy children: This was no act of God, as the horror of famine or cyclone. is. This was the kind of evil only man can perpetuate. It need not have happened.

Tragically, as UNHCR's 4 decades of continued service in situations like this attest, it is likely to continue to happen. Our film, "The Kurdish Calamity" asked the question, when will the international community ever be ready for such crises? Why must UNHCR, delegated by the world community to deal with refugee crises, be reduced to begging at such times: Why, when 2,000 children a night are dying, is discussion of funding the crisis, limited largely to bilateralism?."

At the end of April, the Stockholm initiative on Global Security and government, jointly produced by members of the Palme, Brandt, Brundtland and south Commissions made a number of recommendations for a New World Order. These included a recognition of the need for a streamlined properly funded global emergency response system.

Such a structure is desperately needed to deal with man made political calamities like this one, which the powerful will undoubtedly continue to inflict on the powerless.