

## Genocide in Iraq, 1988

Source: Human Rights Watch <http://hrw.org/english/docs/2006/08/14/iraq13979.htm>

**The Anfal Campaign** against the Kurds was a systematic and deliberate murder of at least 50,000 and possibly as many as 100,000 Kurds. The killings occurred between February and September 1988.

Baghdad embarked on an eight-stage military campaign as it moved systematically from the southeastern part of the Kurdish region of northern Iraq to the northwestern corner over six months. This campaign, under the leadership of the then secretary of the Ba'ath Party's Northern Bureau, Ali Hassan al-Majid, was directed against the Kurdish guerilla organizations known as peshmerga, as well as civilians living in what the government had declared "prohibited zones."

The Anfal campaign was **the culmination of a long-term strategy to solve what the government saw as its "Kurdish problem."** Since the Ba'ath Party coup in 1968, the Iraqi government had deemed the Kurds as a threat to the nation. Baghdad forced many Kurds to leave their homes and relocated them in the Kurdish "Autonomous Region." It then "Arabized" the formerly Kurdish areas by enticing Arab tribe's people there with offers of relocation benefits. In the mid-1980s the government began to demarcate special areas within the Autonomous Region that it declared to be off-limits. The residents of these "prohibited zones" were, with very minor exceptions, **Kurds who after the October 1987 census were defined as non-Iraqi nationals and traitors.** In 1988, they were marked for destruction.

The "prohibited zones" were large areas that covered most of rural Iraqi-Kurdistan. The government had lost control of these regions because it had deployed so many troops to fight the war with Iran. By declaring these areas off-limits, Baghdad sought to regain control over them. Although the "prohibited zones" did not include all Iraqi Kurds, they were home almost exclusively to Kurds. The report shows that the vast majority of residents were civilian men, women and children. Many of the villages in the "prohibited zones" were rarely visited by Kurdish guerillas. The Ba'ath Party government simply treated all persons present in the zones alike without distinguishing between combatants and civilians.

After the 1987 national census, Baghdad portrayed the population's refusal to leave its ancestral lands and "return to the national ranks" as an act of collaboration (probably with the insurgency, possibly with Iran). This "collaboration" was categorized as a betrayal of the Iraqi war effort which, according to Ba'athist ideology, was a pan-Arab cause. This assessment was especially sensitive at a time when Iraq, supported financially and logistically by most Arab countries, was fighting against Iran. In official pronouncements, national boundaries dissolved and age-old ethnic identities were recycled. **Government propaganda alleged that "the Kurds" had allied themselves with "the enemy Persians" against "the Arabs."**

**The treatment of those who were loyal to the government was no different, which shows that the official policy was based not on political loyalty but on ethnicity.** Even pro-government tribes and/or members of the pro-government Kurdish militia, the National Defense Battalions, were warned that they and their families would not be spared if they chose to remain in their villages in the "prohibited zones."

After declaring the areas to be off limits, the government imposed an economic blockade on the "prohibited zones" to make life there difficult to sustain. In a policy of escalating repression, the government then resorted to force. Iraqi troops shelled and bombed thousands of villages, where Kurds had lived for generations.

The pretext for the policy was the presence of the Kurdish guerilla organizations, which had been using some of these sectors as bases for their insurgency. But what had begun as a counter-insurgency effort against

rebels became a murderous campaign against a distinct part of the Kurdish population. **The repression against the Kurds of the “prohibited zones” escalated from economic embargo to air and artillery bombardments to the systematic slaughter of everyone present.**

The Anfal occurred at a time when the Iraqi government believed that Iran would soon agree to a cease-fire which would have freed the Iraqi military to redeploy troops to the north. In February 1988, the Iraqi military launched the Anfal with an assault on the headquarters of one of the Kurdish parties, the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK). The armed forces, meeting little or no resistance, then began moving through the “prohibited zones.” Residents were swept up in the Anfal dragnet, detained in temporary camps for identification and registration and then driven off to execution sites outside the Kurdish region. There they were summarily shot and buried in the desert by bulldozers. Those few who managed to avoid the dragnet and sought refuge in the towns and housing complexes were hunted down, arrested, and also executed.

The mass killings of rural Kurds ended in September 1988, but those who surrendered during an amnesty announced that month (after Iraqi troops had regained full control over all the “prohibited zones”), were never allowed to return to their land and homes. These people were thereafter treated as second-class citizens without any rights. They were consigned to housing complexes or dumped on barren tracts; they were not permitted to change residence; and they were forbidden to return to their villages in the “prohibited zones.” For the agriculture-dependent Kurds, this treatment denied them their means of subsistence. This policy remained in place until the 1991 uprising.

### **The Lessons of Halabja: An Ominous Warning**

Source: U.S. State Department

<http://usinfo.state.gov/products/pubs/iraq/warning.htm>

Only after the first wave of air and artillery bombardments had driven the inhabitants to underground shelters did the Iraqi helicopters and planes return to unleash their lethal brew of mustard gas and nerve agents.

It was March 16, 1988, and the Kurdish village of Halabja, which lies near Iraq's border with Iran, had the misfortune of being on the front lines of the Iran-Iraq War, then in its eighth year. The inhabitants, who numbered 50,000 or more at the time, knew the hard realities of conventional war firsthand, but they had no preparation for the nightmare that descended upon them that day — and continues to wreak havoc upon the survivors and their offspring today.

Journalist Jeffrey Goldberg, who has written extensively about Halabja, said in a radio interview:

*You have to understand something here that's so diabolically clever. The Iraqis knew that gas is heavier than air and would penetrate cellars and basements more effectively by launching a conventional artillery attack on the town for several hours. In other words, they knew that people would do what they always did during an artillery barrage and run to their basements. They were stuck in their basements, and then [the Iraqis] launched the chemical weapons attack turning them, really, into gas chambers.*

As the gas spread and animals died and birds dropped out of trees, the panicked families, many blinded by the chemical agents, gathered up hysterical, gasping children, and tried to escape downwind. Goldberg, writing in the *New Yorker* magazine, relates the account of one survivor, Nouri Hama Ali, who led his family toward Anab, a resettlement center outside Halabja for those whose villages had been destroyed by the Iraqi Army:

*"On the road to Anab, many of the women and children began to die. The chemical clouds were on the ground. They were heavy. We could see them." People were dying all around, he said. When a child could not go on, the parents, becoming hysterical with fear, abandoned him. "Many children were left on the ground, by the side of the road. Old people as well. They were running, then they would stop breathing and die."*



**Young victims of the Halabja attacks.**  
(Courtesy of the Kurdish Democratic Party)

When the pictures of the contorted, often bleached civilian victims first reached a horrified world, the assumption was that several hundred had died in part of a pattern of much larger-scale chemical attacks on Iranian forces. But time and investigation have proved otherwise.

The current consensus among experts inside and outside government is that as many as 5,000 died in the March 1988 attack on Halabja. Moreover, the methods used in the attack appear to underscore the regime's interest in using chemical agents to terrorize population centers.

### **Al-Anfal**

Halabja was neither an aberration nor a desperate act of a regime caught in a grinding, stalemated war. Instead, it was one event in a deliberate, large-scale campaign called Al-Anfal to kill and displace the predominately Kurdish inhabitants of northern Iraq. In an exhaustive study published in 1994, Human Rights Watch concluded that the 1988 Anfal campaign amounted to an extermination campaign against the Kurds of Iraq, resulting in the deaths of at least 50,000 and perhaps as many as 100,000 persons, many of them women and children.

Baghdad launched about 40 gas attacks against Iraqi Kurdish targets in 1987-88, with thousands killed. But many also perished through the regime's traditional methods: nighttime raids by troops who abducted men and boys who were later executed and dumped in mass graves. Other family members — women, children, the elderly — were arrested for arbitrary periods under conditions of extreme hardship, or forcibly removed from their homes and sent to barren resettlement camps. As Human Rights Watch details, Iraqi forces demolished entire villages — houses, schools, shops, mosques, farms, power stations — everything to ensure the destruction of entire communities.

### **Poison's Legacy**

The 1988 chemical attack on Halabja has left behind a cruel and persistent legacy.

Initially, the vicious brew of mustard gas — a blistering agent that affects the membranes of the nose, throat, and lungs — and such nerve agents as sarin, tabun, and VX, attacked the villagers' eyes and respiratory tracts. Some survived with scarred lungs; others were blinded, either temporarily or permanently.

But the chemicals also contaminated the food and water supply, and surveys conducted by the Halabja Medical Institute (HMI) have documented that the health effects on the population have been devastating and long lasting: from increased cancers, notably colon cancer, and respiratory diseases, to heightened levels of miscarriages and infertility among women. And perhaps most tragic: extraordinarily high levels of severe and life-threatening abnormalities among the children of Halabja. One of the first outside medical experts to study the impact of the poison gas attacks on Halabja was Christine Gosden, a British professor of medical genetics who first traveled to northern Iraq in 1998 and founded the Halabja Medical Institute. In a 1998 *Washington Post* article, she wrote:

*What I found was far worse than anything I had suspected, devastating problems occurring 10 years after the attack. These chemicals seriously affected people's eyes and respiratory and neurological systems. Many became blind. Skin disorders which involve severe scarring are frequent, and many progress to skin cancer.*

Working in conjunction with doctors in the area, I compared the frequency of these conditions such as infertility, congenital malformations and cancers (including skin, head, neck, respiratory system, gastrointestinal tract, breast, and childhood cancers) in those who were in Halabja at the time with an unexposed population from a city in the same region. We found the frequencies in Halabja are at least three to four times greater, even 10 years after the attack. An increasing number of children are dying each year of leukemias and lymphomas.

In a summary of its research on the attacks, HMI reached these conclusions:

*While these weapons had many terrible direct effects such as immediate death, or skin and eye burns, Iraqi government documents indicate they were used deliberately for known long-term effects, including cancers, birth defects, neurological problems, and infertility. Inexpensive in terms of death per unit cost, there is evidence that these weapons were used in different combinations by Ba'ath forces attempting to discern their effectiveness as weapons of terror and war.*

Mike Amitay, executive director of the Washington Kurdish Institute, spells out one of the important lessons of Halabja: "After the events of 9/11 and the subsequent anthrax crisis, it is clear that no one is immune from weapons of mass destruction. The people of Iraqi Kurdistan represent the largest civilian population ever exposed to such weapons. The benefit to the international community from learning about their experiences is incalculable."

Halabja and Anfal are not simply history lessons but portents of what Saddam and his regime may hold for the future. In the immediate aftermath of the Halabja attack, for example, it is clear that Iraqi soldiers, wearing protective gear, returned to study the effectiveness of their attacks by dividing the city into grids and then determining the number and location of the dead.

For the Iraqi regime, Halabja appears to have been a testing ground.

## **Killing of Iraq Kurds 'genocide'**

**A court in The Hague has ruled that the killing of thousands of Kurds in Iraq in the 1980s was an act of genocide.**

Source: BBC news <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/4555000.stm>

The ruling came in the case of Dutch trader Frans van Anraat, who was given a 15-year sentence for selling chemicals to Saddam Hussein's regime. He was found guilty of complicity in war crimes over a 1988 chemical attack that killed more than 5,000 people, but acquitted of genocide charges. It is the first trial to deal with war crimes against Kurds in Iraq and Iran.

### **'Intent to destroy'**

Dozens of ethnic Kurds gathered in the packed courtroom to hear the verdict.

Before van Anraat could be convicted, the judges had to decide whether the 1988 attack on Iraqi Kurds in Halabja amounted to genocide.

According to the 1948 Geneva Convention, genocide is defined as "acts committed with the intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnic, racial or religious group". **The Dutch court said it considered "legally and convincingly proven that the Kurdish population meets requirement under Genocide Conventions as an ethnic group".**

"The court has no other conclusion than that these attacks were committed with the intent to destroy the Kurdish population of Iraq," the ruling said. However, observers say the Dutch court's decision may not have much influence on the Iraqi tribunal, which is hearing the trial of Saddam Hussein.

The court is believed to be preparing a case against him for the use of chemical weapons in Halabja in northern Iraq.

### **'Contribution'**

Van Anraat was not in court to hear the verdict. He was charged with supplying thousands of tons of raw materials for chemical weapons used in the 1980-1988 war against Iran, and against Iraqi Kurds. The court found him guilty of aiding war crimes, as "his deliveries facilitated the attacks".

"He cannot counter with the argument that this would have happened even without his contribution," the presiding judge said.

However, the judges ruled that van Anraat was not aware of the genocidal intentions of the Iraqi regime when he sold the ingredients for poison gas. Victims' relatives clapped when the sentence was read out, while dozens danced in a circle to drums outside the court.

Defense lawyers said they would appeal against the sentence, which was the maximum that could be imposed for the charge. The 63-year-old was arrested in 1989 in Italy at the request of the US Government. He was later released and fled to Iraq, where he remained until 2003. He was arrested in December 2004 at his Amsterdam home.