

Anfal - The Kurdish Genocide

By Kameel Ahmady

Kak Ali Mustapha Hama wore his traditional Kurdish headgear (janedani), in full Kurdish regalia as he looked angrily at Saddam Hussein, just meters away in the witness stand. Whereas others could not, Kak Ahemd bravely and defiantly faced Saddam, and looking straight into his eyes, called him a murderer, who he claims killed many members of his family during the Anfal operations.



Ali Mustapha Hama

Watching Kak Ali live on BBC brought a strong surge of emotion and a flood of memory, as he spoke in Kurdish in the heavily guarded court set up in the Green Zone of Iraq. He faced the Iraqi dictator, and dared name him without stating his full title as president, Gahad Al Rahis- Saddam Al-Hussien when he was the Iraqi tyrant ruler – something unimaginable only three years ago.

Although I was 'lucky' enough not to have been one of the direct victims of the massacre, I remember well the aftermath of the inhumanity in Halabja, in the northern Kurdish region of Iraq, Kurdistan. Only a teenager at time of the Anfal and chemical attack of Halabja, living in the western Kurdish region of Iran, I recall that we were mobilised through the local mosques and deployed to the border of south Kurdistan (Iraq) to receive and assist with survivors and victims of Halabja, along with thousands of Kurdish refugees, men, women and children who were fleeing the deadly brutality of Saddam's army.

Some years later, after the humiliating arrest of Saddam deep inside a hole in the ground, allegedly facilitated by Kurdish guerrilla fighters (pershmerga), now the world finally sees him facing trial for killing over 180,000 Kurdish people on their own land. While question hangs over the court proceedings as to how the case for genocide might be won, there is no doubt amongst Kurds themselves that Saddam's act of indiscriminate killing in 1988 was genocide. This is a view which is corroborated by the Kurds' experiences of systematic and violent oppression throughout the entire history of Saddam's rule in Iraq, and also widely held at the international level.

Now Saddam Hussein and his co-defendants are being tried over the Anfal campaign in Kurdistan, ordered by Saddam himself and Ali Hassan Al-Majid, ('Chemical Ali') in which Iraqi bombers were to attack the Kurdish town of Halabja using chemical weapons and nerve gases such as Tabun and Sarin. These gases left thousands of civilians dead, many thousands wounded, and tens of thousands homeless. Including Halabja, there were in total eight Anfal campaigns between February and September 1988. All the defendants face charges of war crimes and crimes against humanity, while Saddam Hussein and Ali Hassan al-Majid are additionally charged with genocide.

What would constitute a 'fair trial' in such a recent and so emotionally charged an event in human history, and the history of the Kurds in particular? When we think we render two people as equivalent to the loss of 180,000 people we have already become desensitised to the true barbarity of the atrocities, and thus

repeat the injustice but such are the dictates of international law, and global politics and the media machine is a numbers game as much as anything else. And genocide is, after all, a crime characterised by the fact that it forms part of a wider plan to destroy, in whole or in part, a particular group. As a crime directed at a group, genocidal intent is necessarily associated with mass crimes. Perhaps our first mistake is to imagine that systemic 'logic' can ever be applied to such inhuman acts of such scale. However we still imagine that it is logical to give names, faces and family histories to the allied soldiers killed in service in Iraq-Iran war, while the faceless Iraqi victims of Saddam's atrocities - their reason for being there in the first place - are forever obscured.

Then again, there is hypocrisy in us all. After his overthrow by British and American troops, while travelling in Palestinian Occupied Territories in 2004(<http://www.kameelahmady.com/articles.php>), I encountered heroic images of Saddam the Great Leader proudly displayed in shops and windows. I even met those ready to defend him as such. Statistically, Saddam has killed more Muslims than any other leader in world history. Such are the complexities of power and deceit in the beleaguered Middle East, where the disenfranchised often cannot tell their enemies from their allies, when they have any at all.

International legal tools for apprehending and punishing the Iraqi principal perpetrators are of course necessary for the long-term successful prevention of future genocides. It is almost certain that serious efforts will also have to be made to bring about greater respect for the rule of law. The norms and legal conventions are essential for the purpose of defining our collective ideals and values, and, most importantly, for guiding our legal actions. Justice has to apply to all otherwise you end up with anarchy, as we have today. Saddam was a vicious tyrant and deserves justice as does every other greedy aggressor. Victor's justice guarantees no peace. Without doubt, Saddam's trail is watched by other dictators in the Middle East who will sooner or later face the same fate.

The case of Halabja in Kurdistan is certainly 'genocide' in accordance with UN Conventions, which includes not only killing but 'causing serious bodily or mental harm' to members of a group. The very fact that there should be a question as to whether the Anfal campaign meets these criteria shows a serious lack of commitment on the part of the international community; to ignore crimes of this magnitude represents both a moral defeat and a political error. 'Every tragedy whispers again of past tragedies', so they say. This affirmation is perhaps most germane to the matter of genocide. The 20th century had barely begun when, under cover of WW I, Armenians in Turkey suffered massacres and deportations that eliminated over 1.5 million men, women, and children, an event which Hitler himself is said to have cited in defence of the Final Solution against the Jews in WWII. Though the crime of genocide is ancient, the concept itself is relatively new. The Kurdish genocide of the 1980s, in which thousands of civilians lost their lives, stands as one of the worst human tragedies of the modern era. In Kurdistan, as in Nazi Germany, Cambodia, Yugoslavia, Rwanda, and Sierra Leone, extremist politics conspired with a diabolic disregard for human life to produce repression, misery, and murder on a massive scale. Genocide in Kurdistan has until now been ignored by the world's super-powers for reasons of political interest.

Although Genocide and mass killing is nothing new for the Kurds in all parts of Kurdistan as it did carried out by the rulers of Turkey, Syria and Iran through out years of oppressions. Such as Dersim (1978) and Wan (1930) along with Sewas (1993) massacre in turkeys Kurdistan, young Kurds burned to death in cinema (1960 Amude) in Syrian Kurdistan along with all inhabitants of Garni, Sofian and

Paswai villages (1978) of Iranian Kurdistan. But Halabja was brought the attention of the international communities to us as Kurds.

'I do not understand this squeamishness about the use of gas. I am strongly in favour of using poisoned gas against uncivilised tribes', Churchill is reported to have said when the British quashed the Kurd uprising in Sulaymaniyah using mustard gas, after Britain seized Iraq post-WWI. Many decades later, Saddam himself was placed in power, with the support of the west, to carry on with this legacy of subduing 'uncivilised tribes', so that western powers, with more important issues to worry about, did not have to deal with it themselves. This is not to forget Kurds themselves who had a direct role in guiding the army of the Ba'athist regime into the villages and towns of Kurdistan.

Saddam must now face trial for the killing of all those innocent people who were gassed simply because they represented to his deranged worldview an unpleasant and uncontrollable obstacle to total power. We as Kurds have waited for this day. When I was asked to write a piece about Saddam's trial from a Kurdish perspective, I leapt at the chance to have the general public hear the personal voice of a Kurd, whose people were and are so deeply affected and as the Director of www.Kurdishmedia.com Dr Rebwar Fatah wrote to Kurdish intellectuals 'I urge you to write about this genocide, aiming to educate international community via objective writings. It is time for words, leaving swords behind'. I see it as my duty to speak and bear witness to this tragic chapter in Kurdish history and in human history, for Kak Ali Mustapha Hama and others, as a Kurd and as a citizen of the world.