Kurds Suffer at Hands of Hussein

With the world’s attention now focused on Iraq, it is perhaps time to remember the Kurds, tens of thousands of whom were gassed by Saddam Hussein in August 1988.

Following the end of the Iran-Iraq war in July 1988, Saddam Hussein redeployed thousands of troops from the front against the Kurds to crush the Kurdish liberation movement, Pesh Merga. Refugees say that Iraq used chemical weapons to obliterate scores of villages. Perhaps as many as two-thirds of Iraq’s 5,000 Kurdish villages have been wiped off the map.

Time magazine reported in September 1988 that some 60,000 Iraqi troops backed by aircraft, tanks and artillery were involved in the operation against the Kurds. Masoud Barzani of the Democratic Party of Kurdistan and Jellal Talibani of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan accused the Iraqis of genocide. Unfortunately, at the time, ‘they received very little sympathy from the international community.

TWO SENATE Foreign Relations staffers, Peter Galbraith and Christopher Van Hollen Jr., toured refugee camps in Turkey in mid-September. They estimated that as many as 65,000 Iraqi Kurds had fled to Turkey after the August attack. Clearly many thousands, perhaps tens of thousands, may have been killed. The exact numbers remain unknown since Iraq never allowed an independent investigation and the area has been closed to outsiders.

Sen. Clairborne Pell sought sanctions against Iraq in September 1988. In early September, the Senate voted to impose a series of tough sanctions against Iraq. The bill required U.S. officials to vote against loans to Iraq from international agencies, to provide’ no direct military or economic aid to Iraq and to stop oil imports and major exports. Intense lobbying by agribusiness, the oil industry and chemical manufacturers derailed the push for sanctions. France, Britain, Italy and West Germany — all jockeying for lucrative contracts with Iraq — were in no mood to jeopardize profits for the sake of principles.

While France supplied billions in weapons deliveries, West Germany built the Iraqi chemical weapons plants.

Iraq’s prominence as a Third World power further shielded it from international action. Egypt, Jordan and Saudi Arabia, for example, all rallied behind Iraq. In the end, Hussein paid no political or economic price for his violation of international law. No nation was willing to sacrifice relations with Iraq on behalf of the Kurds or international law.

It is no wonder that we need to be reminded of the incident since it passed almost
unnoticed. After reports of the outrage, substantiated by Amnesty International and Physicians for Human Rights, a total of eight short news items appeared in popular magazines such as Time and Newsweek. While articles such as “Chemical Genocide in Iraq?” detailed the worst atrocity of the 1980s against a civilian population, Time magazine hit the nail on the head with an article, “Where is the Outrage?”

THE KURDS have been struggling for an independent Kurdistan since the fall of the Ottoman empire some seven decades ago. They have been the subject of extremely brutal repression by both the Turks and Iraqis, who have often cooperated in repressing the Kurdish national movement. The Kurds’ historical and moral case for an autonomous political expression is older and stronger than that of the Palestinians, and they have been subject to far greater brutality. It is ironic that the condemnation of Israelis for using tear gas was greater than the Iraqi for mass extermination with nerve and mustard gas.

Perhaps now is the time to recognize the legitimacy of the Kurdish desire for an independent Kurdistan that also would help take some of the wind out of the Iraqi sails, especially considering the fact that the Kurds occupy Iraq’s oil-rich areas. If war breaks out, the possibility for such a state would exist

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