

Tells the Facts and Names the Names CounterPunch

\$2.50

March 16-31, 2006

Alexander Cockburn and Jeffrey St. Clair

VOL. 13, NO. 6

TALES OF LUNACY AND HOPE IN NEW ORLEANS

BY BILL QUIGLEY

from New Orleans.

In this city, seven months after Katrina, senior citizens are living in their cars. WWL-TV introduced us to Korean War veteran Paul Morris, 74, and his wife Yvonne, 66. They have been sleeping in their two-door sedan since January. They have been waiting that long for FEMA contractors to unlock their 24' x 10' trailer in their yard and connect the power so they can sleep inside it in front of their devastated home.

This tale of lunacy doesn't even begin to stop there.

Their trailer may well cost more than their house. While FEMA flat out refuses to say how much the government is paying for trailers, reliable estimates by the *New York Times* and others place the cost at over \$60,000 each.

How could these tiny FEMA trailers cost so much?

Circle B Enterprises of Georgia was awarded \$287 million in contracts by FEMA for temporary housing. At the time, that was the seventh highest award of Katrina money in the country. According to the *Washington Post*, Circle B was not even being licensed to build homes in its own state of Georgia and filed for bankruptcy in 2003. The company does not even have a website.

Here is how it works. The original contractor takes their cut and subcontracts out the work of constructing the trailer to other companies. Once it is built, they subcontract out the transporting the trailers to yet other companies that pay drivers, gas, insurance and mileage. They then subcontract out the hookups of the trailers and keep taking cuts for their services. Usually none of the people who make the money are lo-

(New Orleans continued on page 6)

The Break-Up of Iraq

BY PATRICK COCKBURN

from Irbil, Iraq.

Iraq is splitting into three different parts. Everywhere there are signs of the fault lines opening up between Sunni, Shia and Kurd. In the days that immediately followed the attack on the Shia shrine in Samarra on February 22, some 1,300 bodies, mostly Sunni, were counted in and around Baghdad. The Shia-controlled Interior Ministry, whose police commandos operate as death squads, asked the Health Ministry to release lower figures. A friend of mine, a normally pacific man living in a middle-class Sunni district in west Baghdad, rang me to say: "I am not leaving my home. The police commandos arrested 15 people from here last night including the local baker. I am sitting here in my house with a Kalashnikov and 60 bullets, and if they come for me I am going to open fire".

It is strange to hear George Bush and John Reid deny that a civil war is going on, given that so many bodies — all strangled, shot or hanged solely because of their religious allegiance — are being discovered every day. Car bombs exploded in the markets in the great Shiite slum of Sadr City. Several days later a group of children playing football in a field noticed a powerful stench coming up from the ground. Police opened up a pit in which 27 dead men were lying, probably all of them Sunni, stripped to their underpants, tortured and shot in the head. Two and a half years ago, when the first suicide bomb directed against Shia killed 85 people outside the shrine of Imam Ali in Najaf, there was no Shia retaliation. They were held back by Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani and the hope of gaining power through legal elections. Since the Samarra bomb this restraint has definitively ended: the Shia militias and death squads slaughter Sunni in tit-for-tat killings every time a Shia is killed. Iraq is getting to be like Lebanon at the start of the civil war in 1975, when

civilians were murdered in the street or dragged out of their cars and killed as soon as militiamen had had a quick glance at their identity cards.

Iraqis often deceive themselves about the depth of the sectarian divisions in their country. They say, rightly, that there are many intermarriages between Sunni and Shia and claim the sectarian divide is less extreme than it is in Belfast, where Roman Catholic and Protestant seldom marry. But such marriages are most common among the educated middle class in Baghdad and, in any case, mixed marriages became less common after 2003, as sectarian differences widened when Sunnis rebelled against the occupation and the Shia community did not.

My Shia and Kurdish friends, who see themselves as wholly non-sectarian, sincerely believe that the three-year-old Sunni rebellion is the work of a few jobless Baathist officials making common cause with Islamic fanatics imported from Saudi Arabia. 'They are not real Iraqis,' they say. They refuse to accept that the guerrillas are supported by most of the five-million-strong Sunni community, even though this has been repeatedly confirmed by opinion polls. The Sunni and the Kurds, for their part, see the Shia leaders as puppets manipulated by Iranian intelligence. They will not take on board that the 15-16 million Shia, 60 per cent of the population, are adamant in refusing to give up their bid for power after being marginalized for centuries. Kurdish hostility to Arabs, after decades of savage suppression, is equally underestimated by both Shia and Sunni.

While I was in Irbil, the Kurdish capital, two Sunni friends emailed me to say they planned to drive from Baghdad to see me. They didn't realize that they were as likely to spend the night in Irbil in jail as in a hotel, because Kurds regard all Arabs visiting from

the rest of Iraq with deep suspicion. The differences between Shia and Kurd explain why there is still no new government of Iraq three months after last December's elections. The previously elected government, which took office on January 30, 2005, was based on a Kurdish-Shia alliance and is still in place, headed by Ibrahim al-Jaafari of the Shiite Dawa Party. Over the past year, the Kurdish leaders have come to detest him and are refusing to agree to a new government with him at its head. They were enraged when he made a surprise visit in early March to Turkey, whose leaders are bitterly resentful of Kurdish gains in Iraq, in order (they feared) to enlist Turkish support in his attempt to rob them of their quasi-independence within Iraq. Above all, the Kurdish leaders fear that Jaafari is maneuvering to avoid implementing an agreement under which they would gain permanent control of the oil province of Kirkuk, which they captured during the war in 2003.

Kirkuk, which sits on top of ten billion barrels of oil reserves, is a prize worth fighting for. It is also, even by Iraqi standards, a depressing and dangerous city. It sits on the plain 150 miles north of Baghdad, overlooked by a citadel whose ancient houses were wrecked by Saddam Hussein after the failed Kurdish uprising of 1991. There are heaps of rubbish everywhere. Despite the oil reserves there are mile-long queues of vehicles waiting to get petrol. Shops are small and mean. In the center of the city

Editors
ALEXANDER COCKBURN
JEFFREY ST. CLAIR

Business
BECKY GRANT
DEVA WHEELER

Assistant Editor
ALEVTINA REA

Counselor
BEN SONNENBERG

Published twice monthly except
August, 22 issues a year

CounterPunch.
All rights reserved.
CounterPunch
PO Box 228
Petrolia, CA 95558
1-800-840-3683 (phone)
counterpunch@counterpunch.org
www.counterpunch.org

there is a cluster of dilapidated market stalls selling fruit and bread. "Kirkuk is a ruin; it is the most ruined city in Iraq", a Kurdish official said, with bitter pride, as we drove through the city. The Kurds want Kirkuk because it was from here they were expelled by systematic ethnic cleansing over the past fifty years. Between 120,000 and 200,000 Kurds and Turkomans were forced from their homes by Saddam after 1991. Almost all the small towns and villages in the province were bulldozed to reduce the Kurdish population and to prevent the buildings being used by guerrillas. The Iraqi constitution, along with the Shia-Kurdish agreement, promised to remove Arab settlers and return Kurds to Kirkuk. Adnan Mufti, the speaker of the Kurdish Parliament, told me that Jaafari's sudden visit to Turkish leaders "makes us suspicious" that the agreements will be forgotten. Grim place though it is, undisputed possession of the province and its oilfields is vital to the Kurds if they are to get close to self-determination.

Under the constitution, passed in a referendum on October 15, the fate of Kirkuk will be decided by December 31, 2007. If Kirkuk joins the Kurdish region, the Kurds will have first rights to new oil discoveries. Saddam had denied them a share in oil revenues; any Kurd found working in the oil industry was sacked. "Of the 9,000 employees working for the Northern Oil Company in 2003, only 18 were Kurds, and they were mostly servants", said Rezzar Ali Hamajan, the chief of Kirkuk's provincial council. Now the Kurds are intent on having their own oil. Given that the need to share oil income is almost the only thing holding Iraq together, the secession of Kirkuk to join the Kurdish Regional Government could be the decisive moment in the dissolution of the country.

Inhabited by Kurds, Turkomans and Arabs, Kirkuk is a good if unnerving place to observe the growing hatred between Iraq's ethnic communities. The Kurds won five out of nine parliamentary seats in the parliamentary election in December. "Security is not as bad as in Baghdad", said Rezzar Ali, a former land surveyor who was for years a Peshmerga commander in the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), but he admits that this not saying a great deal. He complained that the media exaggerated the violence in the city. "One day a rich Kurdish lady was kidnapped", he said. "They claimed she was a female Kurdish leader. In fact, it was just an ordinary kidnapping". He admitted

that many Arab police officers were likely to be collaborating with the insurgents and that several Arab police chiefs had been arrested.

But one recent development had shocked even Rezzar Ali despite years of guerrilla warfare with largely Arab insurgents. In the center of Kirkuk there is a long building, imposing compared to the ramshackle houses all around. This is the Republic hospital. It is here that most of the casualties from gun battles, bombings and assassinations are brought. In 2005, some 1,500 people were killed or wounded in Kirkuk province.

Badly wounded soldiers, police and civilians were taken to the emergency section of the hospital. Large numbers of them died, and it turned out there was an extraordinary reason for this. Some time earlier, the hospital had recruited an enthusiastic young doctor called Louay, who was always willing to help. What other doctors didn't know was that Louay, an Arab, was a member of an insurgent cell of the Ansar al-Sunna group. He used his position to ensure that soldiers, policemen and government officials died of their injuries. A police inquiry found Dr. Louay guilty of killing 43 of his patients. He doesn't seem to have found this very difficult. Many of the injured were bleeding when they reached the hospital. According to Colonel Yadgar Shukir Abdullah Jaff, a senior policeman, "Louay was able to go anywhere in the hospital because he was an assistant. He was there continuously. He would inject patients he wanted to kill with a high dosage of a medicine, which made them bleed more."

Given that Iraqi hospitals are invariably short-staffed and there is little time for autopsies, Dr. Louay might have been able to carry on his killings indefinitely. But when Kurdish security in Sulaimaniyah, where the PUK is based, arrested the leader of his cell, Abu Muhijiz, whose real name is Malla Yassin, confessed that Louay was a member of his group. He detailed the grisly work that had been carried out over the previous eight or nine months.

In Kirkuk, the most effective military and police units are Kurdish. The same is true in Mosul, the mainly Sunni city on the Tigris further to the west. Nominally, there are 12,000 police in Mosul province, drawn mainly from the Jabour tribe. But Saadi Pire, the former PUK leader in Mosul, says: "These are policemen only by day and terrorists at night." The Sunni in Mosul, for their part, see what the U.S.A. claims