

The Kurds

Trekking home

REASSURED by the presence of friendly allied troops, thousands of Kurdish refugees have left their mountain camps for the "safe haven" established by the allies in the warmer valleys of north-western Iraq. Kurdish *peshmerga* guerrillas lifted their roadblocks this week to allow the refugees to pass. In a wheatfield outside Zakho, British

troops pitched tents, laid water pipes and dug latrines. United Nations officials have arrived in Zakho to take over the camps at some later date.

It is a start, but no more. Above Zakho, British and American officers talk of emptying the mountain camps in days. That is unlikely. There are some 700,000 Iraqi Kurds along the Turkish frontier, most of them many days from Zakho. The allies are extending the safe haven eastwards, but it will take weeks to build camps for all the refugees. Moreover the allies do not plan to ex-

tend the haven south along the Iranian border (the Iranian government opposes the idea). The best hope for the hundreds of thousands of Kurds stranded on that border is still to cross into Iran, to join the 1m or so refugees already there.

For days Kurdish refugees trying to return to Zakho had been stopped by Kurdish *peshmerga* guerrillas who claimed that the handful of Iraqi police in the town made the place unsafe. Not until April 29th did the *peshmerga* lift their roadblocks. Some Kurds complained that the real aim of the

An Iraqi prison diary

FROM A SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT

Our correspondent crossed into Iraq with Kurdish guerrillas in March, when their uprising against Saddam Hussein was going well. Here, delayed by nearly three weeks in an Iraqi prison, is his report

BAKHTIAR, a Kurdish rebel, took a pen to my hand. "This is the city," he said drawing a circle. He added two solid dots on the left and bottom of my palm: "This is the Iraqi army." Our Kurdish guide was wrong. As we attempted to flee Kirkuk, he, I and two other reporters drove directly into an Iraqi ambush.

Having taken cover behind a house, we watched a column of tanks descend from a mountain pass. With a French-Vietnamese photographer I spent 18 hours hiding in a ditch. The Iraqi soldiers were camped directly on top of us. We last saw Bakhtiar, who was armed, and Gad Gross, a German photographer on assignment for *Newsweek*, running behind a house. Soon after sunrise, they were discovered; they surrendered but within minutes both had been executed.

We were found in our ditch an hour later; the presence of an Iraqi officer during our capture may have been the only reason why we too were not killed. It was March 29th. My blindfold was made of thin cloth so I could still see a bit.

It was then that I knew that the Kurdish rebellion would soon be finished. I could hear and see the outlines of dozens of tanks, artillery, armoured personnel carriers and other heavy vehicles. Whole divisions were massing for a counter-offensive. The Kurds had no pre-knowledge of this build-up. And, their enthusiasm apart, they had no strategy capable of prevailing against the vastly superior firepower of the Iraqi army. Saddam Hussein was clearly planning to retake all of Kurdistan. He recaptured most of it in less than four days.

The Kurds were simply over-confident: the initial liberation of Kurdistan had gone too well, with local villagers and armed guerrillas overrunning local mili-

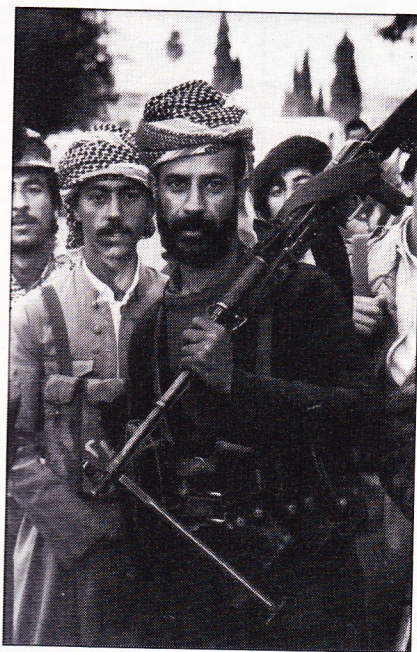
tary posts and even bases. But these posts had been defended by regular army conscripts whose performance gave little indication of what to expect from the special forces and Republican Guard divisions. Their tanks and helicopters made all the difference.

Blindfolded, we underwent interrogations. During the most severe ones, I was accused of being a CIA agent and told that if I confessed I would go free, but if I "continued to lie" I would spend "many years" in jail. In the event, without any confessions, I was released "on the personal order of President Saddam" after 18 days.

One evening a prisoner was dragged out of his cell. We heard him making strange sounds, interspersed with the sound of heavy wood meeting flesh. The soldiers made him crow like a rooster, laughing when a real rooster crowed as if to answer his call. During his ordeal, the sound of guards playing ping-pong competed for our attention. A prisoner with a rare beautiful voice began to sing, almost wail, in prayer. The sounds of pain, mirth and prayer blended strangely.

The guards' instrument of choice was a heavy rubber hose. We listened, and occasionally watched, as men were beaten. Some were hit on the soles of the feet. If a prisoner raised his hands to defend himself, he would be savagely beaten around the head and body. The guards also had a collection of heavy sticks, some as thick and twice as long as a baseball bat. I watched as one blindfolded man cried out in the cell-block yard: about five guards surrounded him, their hoses and sticks flailing. One playfully held his broom handle like a pool cue as he repeatedly poked the weeping man in the head.

"Stun guns" which give electric shocks were another favourite. A black man, per-



No match for tanks

haps from Sudan, was hosed down and then made to stand outside on an overcast day. He was interrogated while he stood there shivering. When the answer failed to satisfy, a guard zapped him with the stun gun, watching him fall helplessly. We sometimes heard faint but terrible cries coming from elsewhere in the prison. We tried to ignore them but they persisted. They were the screams not of fear or sharp pain but of a man in long agony.

The prisoners we were with seemed to be neither hardened criminals nor important enough to be political prisoners. But they were all under suspicion and, in Iraq, to be under suspicion is as good as being charged with a crime. If a person is suspected of being against the regime, the suspicion can result in his being abused and held incommunicado in jail.

There was a larger-than-lifesize portrait of Saddam next to one of my cells. A Kurd I was with spoke no English except to reiterate that "Saddam is a donkey!" Perhaps, I thought, but this donkey is still up on its legs and kicking.