

Iraqis who fled homes in fear face new terror as Turkey targets PKK rebels

2007-10-21

Refugees from across the country found peace in the Kurdish north, but are now threatened by shelling and cross-border raids

Michael Howard in Anishky, northern Iraq
Saturday October 20, 2007
The Guardian

When Youssef Toma and his family fled their home in Baghdad's perilous Dora neighbourhood and found refuge in the peaks and valleys of Kurdistan, they assumed their fear had been left behind with their furniture.

With the help of local authorities, Mr Toma, a former manager of an insurance company, had spent the last year building a new house, and life, in Anishky, a village nestling at the foot of the Matin mountains in the bucolic Sabna valley, 13 miles from the Turkish border.

Mr Toma, a deacon in the Assyrian church, and his family soon became active members of the neighbourhood congregation. He took special pride in developing his garden. Standing by a healthy crop of tomatoes this week, he gestured with his trowel at the perimeter walls of a palace Saddam Hussein built for his wife Sajida in the late 70s - a reminder, he said, that the beauty of the region was not just prized by locals.

Last weekend, however, Mr Toma's rural idyll was brutally disrupted. The dread he felt in Baghdad returned. For about 45 terrifying minutes, a barrage of Turkish artillery shells rained down from the clear night sky upon Anishky.

Turkish troops gathered across the border had supposedly been aiming at rebel bases of the Kurdistan Workers party or PKK, believed to be hiding high up in the mountains. They missed.

"Our house was shaking. I told my family it was thunder," said Mr Toma, as he looked at a blackened patch of mountainside about 100 metres behind his house, where a shell had fallen. "But I have lived in Baghdad for 40 years, so I know the sound of bombs. There were 22 of them. We escaped the Islamic terrorists, and now we are terrorised by the Turks. Where else can we run?"

Anishky was not the only village shelled this week. According to Bishop Shlimon in the nearby town of Sersing, at least six other villages in the area, many inhabited by Christian refugees from Baghdad, were affected.

"The bombardment lasted for more than four hours, striking farmlands, killing livestock and destroying orchards and roads used by villagers," he said. "It is a miracle no one was killed."

In the provincial capital of Dohuk, the deputy governor, Gorgees Shlaymoon Kaaee, also a Christian, said that night the area was hit by at least 250 shells. "Our villages have been here for centuries. We have nothing to do with PKK. Yet we are being punished all the same."

The shelling came as the Turkish parliament prepared to sanction cross-border attacks to root out guerrillas from the PKK, which has fought a bloody campaign for Kurdish rights against Turkish forces in the country's heavily Kurdish south-east since 1984. Turkey says 30 soldiers and civilians have been killed in PKK attacks since late September.

Domestic pressure

Under huge domestic pressure to take action, Ankara has deployed about 60,000 troops on its side of the border with Iraq, and has demanded that Iraq's Kurdish leaders, whom it accuses of aiding the PKK, cooperate with Baghdad in eradicating the rebel bases and extraditing PKK leaders. Turkey also accuses the US and the government in Baghdad of not doing enough to crack down on the rebels in Iraqi territory.

Though the Turkish prime minister, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, said this week an invasion of northern Iraq was not imminent, Turkish leaders say they reserve the right to protect the country against the rebels it claims are launching attacks from Iraq. The decision was criticised by the international community, who fear an attack would destabilise Iraqi Kurdistan, the country's most secure region. Iraq's Kurdish leaders have urged dialogue and peace.

Iraq's foreign minister, Hoshiyar Zebari, himself a Kurd, this week demanded the PKK leave Iraqi soil. He predicted any Turkish attacks on northern Iraq would be on a limited scale.

But that is of little comfort to the villagers. They are particularly alarmed by reports that Turkey's generals have drawn up plans to establish a 15-mile buffer zone along the Iraqi side of the border that would include many places where refugees have settled.

Yet the Turks are already here - and have been for over a decade, with the tacit agreement of the Kurdish authorities. At one end of the Sabna valley, a garrison of Turkish soldiers occupies the Barmani airbase. To the east, in the hilltop town of Amediya, a Turkish tank watches from a small outpost. Their role is to monitor the PKK fighters, though the guerrillas are actually far away. "We don't like them to be here, but what can we do?" said Mohsen Qatani, a local tribal chief. "We ignore them and hope they ignore us. It is not our fight."

Bishop Shlimon said an estimated 6,000 Assyrian Christians who have been uprooted by violence elsewhere have found homes along Iraq's northern border with Turkey. The influx has breathed new life into many semi-abandoned rural communities, he said. This week in Anishky, for example, a Christian from Baghdad opened a hall where 1,000 people could gather for weddings.

"But if Turkey continues to raid or bomb us, or even invades," said Bishop Shlimon, "then how will any of us get the peace or the life we are looking for?"

Refugee warning

Local authorities in the Kurdistan region said they feared 30,000 people may be displaced if Turkish troops enter across the border. The UN's high commissioner for refugees, Antonio Guterres, also warned of the danger of a refugee crisis in northern Iraq if Turkey attacks. "The northern governorate, or Kurdistan ... has been the most stable area of Iraq," he said. "It is an area also where you find Iraqis from the south and central Iraq who came seeking security. I can only express our deep concern about any

development that might lead to meaningful displacements of population."

In the village of Barnatha, Juliet Jabril, 37, said she missed her life and her hairdressing business in Baghdad, which she left in July.

"There was no alternative but to leave," she said tearfully. First she saw an 11-year-old boy, who was selling petrol on the street outside her salon, shot dead. Then masked men visited her salon and told her that hairdressing "was against the will of Allah".

"I know the fate of other hairdressers," she said. "All I want is to live in peace, and I thought Kurdistan would offer me sanctuary." She said she did not support the PKK's violence, but worried that if they were forced to leave their bases, "it might create space for Islamic militants to come in from Iran".

"And then we'd see the masked men in our beautiful valley," she said.

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/international/story/0,,2195466,00.html>