

BAGHDAD

ColdType

APRIL 21 2004

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Thirteen year old Sara kept giving me shy smiles and when the grown ups had gone, she came and sat with me, asked why. Why did the Americans destroy our homes? This is not their country. Why did they invade our town? They made us homeless, to wander from house to house asking for help. Bombing went on all day and night and people sent cars from Baghdad to get the people who needed to leave.”

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The Author

JO WILDING is a 29-year-old activist, writer and trainee lawyer from Bristol, UK. She first went to Iraq in August 2001 with Voices in the Wilderness to break the sanctions as an act of civil disobedience and to get a perspective on what was happening for the purpose of advocacy work in the UK. In November 2002 she forced the UK Customs and Excise to take her to court for breaking the sanctions. It was the first time the legality of the sanctions had been considered directly by a British court.

She returned to Iraq as an independent observer in February 2003 and stayed for the month before the war and the first 11 days of the bombing, before being expelled by the Iraqi foreign ministry as part of a purge of independent foreigners.

Her writing about the situation for ordinary people in Iraq was published around the world: the Guardian online, the New Zealand Herald, Counterpunch (US and internet), Australian radio and in Japan, Korea and Pakistan.

Before going to Iraq, she worked as a mental health advocate for Bristol Mind and in the Immigration Department at Bristol Law Centre, as well as studying part time for a law diploma. She completed the diploma in June 2003 and will start studying for bar qualification in September 2004.

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“This is my honeymoon,” Heba said, in the crowded corridor of bomb shelter number 24 in the Al-Ameriya district of Baghdad. Married just under a month, she fled Falluja with her extended family. “There were bombs all the time. We couldn’t sleep. Even if you fell asleep, nightmares woke you up. We just gathered the whole family in one room and waited.

“It is better here than in Falluja. We hear bombs but they are far away and not so many. But there is no water in here: we have to go outside for water for drinking, cooking and washing ourselves and our clothes and we buy ice. There is no fridge, no fans, no air conditioning, no generator and only one stove for us all. We have to go to the garden for a toilet and that’s

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a problem at night. Everyone has diarrhoea from the ice that we bought.

“Now I am a bride but I couldn’t bring any of my clothes.” As if there would be any privacy anyway, the 88 members of 18 families piled on mattresses in the long narrow passage from the door to the kitchen at the end, from where a stream of tea and sweet sesame biscuits is flowing, part of the commemoration of Heba’s uncle.

He died seven days ago, the day after they arrived in Baghdad. Heba’s dad Rabiia said his brother died of sadness. Because all the family’s identity documents were in Falluja, they were unable to get the body from the hospital. Rabiia met some friends, doctors who worked in the hospital, and they were able to help him get the body back after a day.

He sent two of his sons back to Falluja with their families yesterday and they phoned him at seven in the evening to tell him not to try to come back. Things are worse than before. They are trying to get back out of Falluja but all the roads are closed. His nephew tried to get back into Falluja today with his family but likewise found all the roads closed. “Now everyone in Falluja is in prison.”

Their story is the same as thousands of others. Faris Mohammed, secretary general of the Iraqi Red Crescent, believes that about 65% of the 300,000 population of Falluja have left their homes in the recent fighting.

Of these 200,000 displaced people, most are staying with extended family in Baghdad or elsewhere or have been given shelter by strangers with space to spare. About 200 families are homeless.

“We left because of the bombs,” Rabiia explained. “The kids were frightened, crying all night. We left on April 9th. Lots of our relatives had cars but there were problems getting fuel. We got all eighteen families together and then waited at the checkpoint. The Americans made us wait hours in the sun to exhaust us. The children were crying with hunger. Then the Americans changed the route we had to take and made us travel by a long side road.

We all arrived at different times ^ some slept in the cars at the checkpoint and arrived in Baghdad the next morning. They would only let through one young man as the driver with each car and only if there was no old man. Some of the families here couldn't get their young men through so they had to come by the river. There was no fuel, no water, no generators, no hospitals there, so families couldn't live.”

His youngest son Mustafa is eleven and wakes up crying every night, saying there's going to be a bomb. Miluuk says it's not just their son: all the kids are having nightmares. Her brother-in-law's child as started sleep walking, asking to go back to his house. Two of Miluuk's daughters,

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Zainab and Maha, have decided to quit school. Maha has developed a blood pressure problem and a stomach microbe that was caused by the bad water.

A nurse called Hadil from Falluja visited them and gave them a list of medicines they need, a couple of injections for one of the women who's pregnant, some medication for stomach ulcers. He runs a pharmacy but has already donated all the medicines he had. Rabiia asked the Red Crescent for help but as yet they've had nothing. He built a toilet with his own money but there's not much left.

Miluuk's sister Sabriya teaches disabled people in the Shuala area. She never got married because of all the wars. "Wars eat your youth. When I was in college we made a census, boys and girls. There were about half girls and half boys but now there are maybe ten times as many girls.

"I can't explain to you. I feel hopeless. I don't know what the future will bring. I thought life would change, things would settle down, this war would be the last for Iraq. They said they came to give peace and human rights but now we're figuring out that that's not true. They don't understand Iraq so they make problems that lead to conflict. They said they would rebuild but they're destroying. Clean water and electricity would be enough."

The story is the same wherever you go. The women feel depressed, the children are distressed, people are trying to get back into Falluja and finding the roads closed; those still inside Falluja are trying to get out and finding the same obstacle.

Two men, two women and eight kids sat in one of the white tents of the new Iraqi Red Crescent camp set up for families fleeing Falluja. Forty families have registered but these two are the only residents so far because there's no sanitation. Unicef promised to provide it, according to Qasim Lefteh, the manager of the camp, but have so far failed to show up and sort it out. Meanwhile they've got permission to use the toilets in the school next door to the football fields they're living on.

Fifty eight members of the extended family left after aerial bombing killed several of their neighbours. "Two of my relatives died and I buried them by my own hands," Adil explained. "There is no way to the hospital so even if they are not killed, injured people are treated at home and there are no medicines; so they die.

"Even if the ambulances tried to come, the Americans tried to shoot them. I saw the Americans shoot at a man and we stayed there from morning till night and no one could help him. the Americans shot at the ambulance. I could see them. They were on the tops of the buildings.

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“Many times it happened. Whenever we saw ambulances the Americans shot at them. They even took over a minaret. They shot a family of women and children going to the market and killed them. A family of 25 people was killed when the Americans bombed their house. We saw a fighter plane firing rockets at their house.”

Their house was in the Shahid district which was heavily bombed. The government hospital is in the same district and was not destroyed, as some reports indicated, but closed down by the American troops. There was a lot of bombing when they left and the aid which had come into the town couldn't be distributed. As they drove out they could see rockets being fired.

The kids were listless. Thirteen year old Sara kept giving me shy smiles and when the grown ups had gone, she came and sat with me, asked why. “Why did the Americans destroy our homes? This is not their country. Why did they invade our town? They made us homeless, to wander from house to house asking for help. Bombing went on all day and night and people sent cars from Baghdad to get the people who needed to leave.” Her brother Hadil is only four but has already learned to hate Americans after he was playing with a toy gun in the street and the troops raided and searched their home. Sara was full of fury.

It took a while to score a smile out of any of the little ones. When the others went off to look at some of the aid that had been given, I started clowning them, blowing bubbles and making balloon animals. Hadil and Hamoudie sat wide-eyed for a couple of minutes, edging closer, and Mustafa, little and in green. Hamoudie popped one first, his face transforming as the soap splattered on his face. The adults faces relaxed into smiles too when they came back and saw the kids dancing in the middle of clouds of shiny bubbles.

“If they open the roads we will go back,” said Eman, Sara’s mum. “Life here is miserable. The Red Crescent are nice to us but there is no work, even for the men.”

The Red Crescent has been supplying food and medicine to Falluja since April 9th but decided to set up a camp for the hundreds of people fleeing. “We chose a site in Namiya district, about 7km south of Falluja but when we arrived to start setting up, the area was already a battle zone. We withdrew another 10km to a site 17km south of Falluja but then the battle spread to there too. When we returned we found some of the tents already burnt,” Faris Mohammed explained.

“We tried to choose sites that were near the road but the problem is that sometimes in these situations the insurgents shoot at troops as they pass

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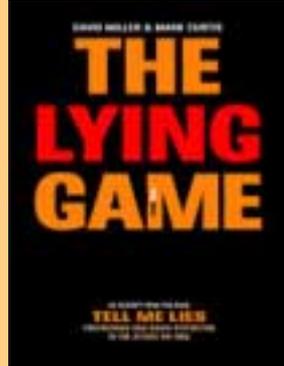
and the troops shoot back at the insurgents, so we decided to set the camp up in Baghdad instead, away from the borders of Falluja.”

But he was adamant that the claims made about Red Crescent ambulances being used to move weapons and insurgents are false. “None of our ambulances has gone missing and we have not been using them to move weapons. During the conflict we were the only Iraqi organisation with permission to go in and out of Falluja. There were no problems from either side until Wednesday, when we had supplies coming in from Dubai. We sent them straight to Falluja but the Americans sent them back saying each vehicle had to have specific permission 24 hours in advance.”

When I got home, Raed said the colour had come back to my cheeks for the first time since the Falluja trips. “I think you have been playing with children,” he said. It’s true. It did make a difference. The violence starts to pervade everything: Karlu and the other kids on our street were playing Hostages as we left in the morning, Ahmed holding one hand over Karlu’s eyes and making sawing motions at his throat with the other hand.

And the news says there’s more fighting in Falluja.

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