

## Cover Story

# Kurds: 'Is this our destiny?'

## Camps little more than mud, stone

By Debbie Howlett

ISIKVEREN, Turkey - Beyevan pulls back the corner of the red and white checked kaffiyeh wrapping her 2-month-old brother, Osman.

The infant is dead. His skin is ashen, his body rigid.

But Fados Ahjeed refuses to believe her youngest child has died during the night.

She squats in the mud near the opening of a makeshift tent and asks 11-year-old Beyevan to bring Osman to her. As Fados holds him to her breast, tears roll down her cheeks.

"Perhaps tomorrow she will let us bury him," says her brother-in-law, Rasheed Ahjeed.

In each crevice of the mountains that divide Turkey and Iraq, misery runs as heavy as the melting snowpack flooding the dirt and gravel roads traversing the frontier. From Syria in the west to Iran in the east, hundreds of thousands of Kurds have fled Saddam Hussein's war machine in an exodus that rivals biblical times. As many as 500,000 Kurds are camped on the sheer and rocky slopes of Isikveren. To the east 70 miles, near Cukurca, is another encampment of 500,000, say military and U.N. officials. Between the camps are scores of smaller settlements, 2,000 to 20,000 Kurds each. They've been allowed just inside the Turkish border but no farther.

Officials estimate as many as 2 million Kurds - non-Arab Muslims who have a unique language and culture - have fled Iraq. Officials in Turkey say another 400,000 or more are headed toward the border camps.

But "camping" is a misleading description of how the Kurds are living. They call this the place that God has forgotten.

Mohammed Yahyid is a weathered man of 52 who led his three brothers' families from Dohuk to the mountains. They drove for a day, but abandoned cars during a napalm attack by Iraqi forces. As 21 family members walked, helicopter gunships fired on them. It took six days to reach this camp where they found nothing but other Kurds.

They pitched a tent using two Persian rugs they carried. It was propped up with the crooked limbs of a tree. Across the top, they laid a 3-foot strip of plastic to prevent rain from seeping through the rugs. The floor of the tent is a muddy carpet of dried leaves. Stones are arranged around the bottom edges, but the rain water still trickles through.

Each day, four women in the family and two teen-age children climb to the snow line to gather snow in plastic jugs for use as drinking water.

The men hike 1 1/2 miles down the mountain and wait for bread trucks. If they're lucky, one will also have potatoes and onions. A few carry macaroni, but there's no water to cook with. Most of the supplies are clothes and baby cribs, items the Yahyid family needs least.

Turkish cargo plane drops Wednesday sent the Yahyids and hundreds of other families scrambling across the hill. One huge crate held tents, another canned food. But all the Yahyid children returned with were tin cans filled with chocolate bars and hard candy.

"My family needs meat and bread, not sweets," says Hosni Ali Uram, who lives in a tent near the Yahyids.

There is some meat. Mohammed Yahyid, who carries a wad of Iraqi dinars in his shirt pocket, sneaked past the military guards one night to buy a lamb from a local farmer.

His mother - whose job it is to watch the children and tend a fire made with twigs and branches - slaughtered the lamb with the only knife the families have between them, tossing the entrails a few feet from the tent.

All the Yahyid children are sick with gastroenteritis and other stomach ailments. The only medical help comes from volunteer nurses in the nearby town of Mardin. Medicine is so precious, it is reserved for only the sickest.

The children and many adults are barefoot because the gooey red mud has swallowed their thin plastic shoes. "When we came here, we lost everything except our worthless money," says Mohammed Yahyid. "Still, we prefer it here. The living is better in Iraq, but we won't return."

The grandmother, Pieros Maheel, grunts and takes a precious cigarette from its hiding place in the hem of her skirt. "Not as long as Saddam is there," she adds. Her husband Jahil, 75, died of a heart attack during their hike to the mountains. They left his body on the side of the road. "To give him a burial," she says, "would have risked our own lives."

Now the worst enemy is the elements. At night, the temperature plunges 10 or 15 degrees below freezing. The spring rain that's a nearly daily occurrence turns to snow.

It's in this cold darkness that death invades the tents. Some Kurds say a dozen or so perish each night from exposure.

This is how Osman Ahjeed died. Even huddled in the middle of his family, the cold and hunger and disease sucked the life out of him. His mother blames Saddam: "He has done this. He wants to kill my children even before they can become soldiers," says Fados Ahjeed.

Nights can seem endless, with sleep coming only an hour or two at a time. The Kurds huddle together in blankets. They cannot lie on the muddy ground so they crouch together, much like the Turkish Kurds in the valley below, who pass the afternoon this way tending flocks of sheeps and goats.

These people - along with Kurds in Iran, Syria and parts of the Soviet Union - share a heritage, if not a homeland. Many of the Iraqi Kurds credit their Turkish brothers for the food supplies sent by trucks from border towns nearby.

But it is not enough. Nor are the truckloads of stale government bread or the supplies dropped by air, including U.S. military rations.

The evidence of desperate need comes every afternoon when hundreds of Kurds walk 1 1/2 miles down the muddy cutbacks to the military encampment at the base of the mountain.

Spread across the narrow road, thousands wait for the bread truck or any food that may arrive. While they wait, they take turns yelling about the great tragedy that befalls them. "Is this our destiny?" shouts one man.

"We wanted to save our families," says Abdul Usmet Aschmadin, 22, who walked through the mountains with 13 relatives. "Still people are coming up the road. Thousands of people. Being alive is better than dead, even if it's here."

But for Fados Ahjeed, life stopped on a mountaintop on the Turkey-Iraq border Wednesday night. "Why should we tell her her baby is dead," asks Rasheed Ahjeed. "It is all she can live for."

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**SUBJECT**

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Cover Story

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ISIKVEREN, Turkey

**CUTLINE**

**TINY BURDEN:** The caretaker of a mosque in Cukurca carries the body of a refugee baby after preparing it for burial. Many children are dying for lack of medical care.

**BREAD MEANS LIFE:** Iraqi refugees Thursday struggle to reach for loaves of bread - a small slice of the relief aid needed - at a makeshift camp near the Turkish town of Isikveren.