

## THE FIRST ANFAL

### » THE SIEGE OF SERGALOU AND BERGALOU, 27 FEBRUARY - 19 MARCH 1988

...It was like the Day of Judgement; you stand before God.

"Survivor of the poison gas attack on Halapja, 16 March 1988"

### THE 16 MARCH CHEMICAL ATTACK ON HALAPJA



*This fifty-four-years-old woman wears the scars of Halabja, an Iraqi town that was annihilated by poison gas in 1988. Twenty-five of her relatives died in the attack, and now her daughter attends to wounds that continue to burn three years later [Photo: Ed Kashi, "When the Borders Bleed"].*

For years, the hostility between Iran and Iraq appeared to the Kurdish parties as a geopolitical loophole that they could exploit to their advantage. After withstanding the siege of Sergalou-Bergalou for two weeks, the PUK took the desperate decision to open a second front with Iranian military support. As their target, the peshmerga chose Halapja, a town on the plain just a few miles from border, in a feint that was designed to draw some of the Iraqi troops away from the siege of Sergalou and Bergalou. The plan turned out to be a tragic miscalculation, as the once beneficial alliance with Iran turned into a crippling liability. For the Halapja diversion only cemented the view of the Iraqi regime that the war against Iran and the war against the Kurds was one and the same thing.

*This fifty-four-years-old woman wears the scars of Halabja, an Iraqi town that was annihilated by poison gas in 1988. Twenty-five of her relatives died in the attack, and now her daughter attends to wounds that continue to burn three years later [Photo: Ed Kashi, "When the Borders Bleed"].*

At the end of February, Iraq stepped up its missile attacks on Teheran as part of the "War of Cities"; the escalation was designed to push the weakened Iranians to the negotiating table on terms favorable to Baghdad. A confident senior official even admitted to Patrick Tyler of the Washington Post that Iraq was trying to lure its adversary into a trap by overextending its forces. "For the first time in our history, we want the Iranians to attack," the official said. At Halabja, the Iranians obliged.

Halabja was a bustling Kurdish town with a busy commercial section and government offices. Villagers displaced from their homes by the war had swollen its population of forty thousand to sixty thousand or more. The peshmerga had been strong there for almost thirty years, with several clandestine parties active Socialists, Communists, and others in addition to Jalal Talabani's PUK. A group with particular local strength

was the pro- Iranian Islamic Movement Party (Bizutnaway Islami Eraqi). As a reprisal against local support for the peshmerga, Iraqi troops had already bulldozed two entire quarters of the town, Kani Ashqan and Mordana, in May 1987. Since about 1983, Iranian troops had been making secret reconnaissance visits to Halabja under cover of darkness. The town lay on the very edge of the war zone, and dozens of small villages between Halabja and the Iranian border had been razed in the late 1970s, their inhabitants resettled in camps on the edge of the city. The greater strategic importance of Halabja, however, was its location just seven miles east of Darbandikhan Lake, whose dam controls a significant part of the water supply to Baghdad.



Pictures of the "missing" relatives.

During the first two weeks of March, a stream of Iraqi intelligence reports noted the build-up of Revolutionary Guards and peshmerga to the west of Halabja and the shelling of the nearby town of Sayed Sadeq to the north by Iranian forces. On 13 March the Iranians officially announced that they had launched a new offensive, Zafar 7, in the Halabja area. According to Teheran radio, the offensive, which was conducted by a joint force of PUIC peshmerga and pasdaran, was in retaliation for the Iraqi regime's recent chemical attacks on the Kurds. A second attack, apparently coordinated, followed the next day. This one was called Bait al-Maqdis 4, and the Iranians claimed that it had taken their forces within twelve miles of Suleimaniyeh. On 16 March, Teheran announced yet another offensive, code-named Val-Fajr 10. Iran boasted that its forces had now advanced to the eastern shore of Darbandikhan Lake, controlling over three hundred square kilometers of Iraqi territory and 102 (presumably destroyed) villages. But the main thrust of Val-Fajr 10, Teheran declared, was the "liberation" of the town of Halabja.

Halabja had been subjected to three days of heavy Iranian shelling from the surrounding hills, beginning on 13 March. One by one, the small Iraqi military posts between Halabja and the border were routed, and their occupants pulled back to the safety of the town. Some stripped off their uniforms and took refuge in the mosques, while some took up temporary defensive positions in local army bases. Others fled altogether. Yet the Baghdad regime resisted the temptation to reinforce Halabja with large numbers of ground troops, for it had an entirely different strategy in mind.

Some Iranian pasdaran had reportedly begun to slip into town as early as 13 March. By the night of 15 March, they were openly parading through the streets, accompanied by Iraqi Kurds, greeting the townspeople and chanting "God is Great! Khomeini is our leader!" They billeted themselves with local Kurdish families and ordered them to prepare dinner. Some rode around Halabja on motorcycles; others

were very young, barely teenagers, and carried only sticks and knives. Many carried gas masks. They asked bewildered people in the streets how far it was to the holy cities of Karbala and Najaf. Militants of the kaqi Islamic Movement did a victory dance outside the headquarters of Amn and the Istikhbarat building, which they took over for themselves. Yet among the townspeople as a whole there was grave apprehension, especially when public employees were ordered on 15 March to evacuate their posts. Swift Iraqi reprisals were widely expected; one Amn cable the next day spoke with notable understatement of the need for "a firm strengthening of military power."

The Iraqi counterattack began midmorning on 16 March with conventional air strikes and artillery shelling from the town of Sayed Sadeq. Most families in Halabja had built primitive air-raid shelters near their homes. Some crowded into these, others into the government shelters, following the standard air-raid drills they had been taught since the beginning of the Iran-Iraq War. The first wave of air strikes appears to have included the use of napalm or phosphorus. "It was different from the other bombs," according to one witness. "There was a huge sound, a huge flame, and it had very destructive ability. If you touched one part of your body that had been burned, your hand burned also. It caused things to catch fire." The raids continued unabated for several hours. "It was not just one raid, so you could stop and breathe before another raid started. It was just continuous planes, coming and coming. Six planes would finish and another six would come."

Those outside in the streets could see clearly that these were Iraqi, not Iranian aircraft, since they flew low enough for their markings to be legible. In the afternoon, at about 3:00, those who remained in the shelters became aware of an unusual smell. Like the villagers in the Balisan Valley the previous spring, they compared it most often to sweet apples, or to perfume, or cucumbers, although one man says that it smelled "very bad, like snake poison." No one needed to be told what the smell was.

The attack appeared to be concentrated in the northern sector of the city, well away from its military bases, although by now these had been abandoned. In the shelters there was immediate panic and claustrophobia. Some tried to plug the cracks around the entrance with damp towels, or pressed wet cloths to their faces, or set fires. In the end they had no alternative but to emerge into the streets. It was growing dark, and there were no streetlights; the power had been cut the day before by artillery fire. In the dim light, the people of Halabja saw nightmarish scenes. Dead bodies of humans and animals littered the streets, huddled in doorways, slumped over the steering wheels of their cars. Survivors stumbled around, laughing hysterically, before collapsing. Iranian soldiers flitted through the darkened streets, dressed in protective clothing, their faces concealed by gas masks. Those who fled could barely see and felt a sensation "like needles in the eyes." Their urine was streaked with blood.

Those who had the strength fled toward the Iranian border. A freezing rain had turned the ground to mud, and many of the refugees went barefoot. Those who had been directly exposed to the gas found that their symptoms worsened as the night wore on. Many children died along the way and were abandoned where they fell. At first light the next morning Iraqi war planes appeared in the sky, apparently monitoring the flight of the survivors. Many kept away from the main roads and scattered into the mountains, despite the ever-present menace of land mines. According to one account, some six thousand people from Halabja congregated at

the ruined villages of Lima and Pega. Another thousand or so gathered among the rubble of Daratfeh, the last village on the Iraqi side of the border.

The Iranians were ready for the influx of refugees. Iranian helicopters arrived at Lima and Pega in the late afternoon, and military doctors administered atropine injections to the survivors before they were ferried across the border. In Iran, all agreed that they were well cared for, although some had injuries that were untreatable, and they died on Iranian soil. The sickest were transferred to hospitals in the Iranian cities of Teheran and Kermanshah and to the smaller town of Paveh. The remainder spent two weeks in a converted schoolhouse in the town of Hersin, where they received medical attention. From there, they were taken to two refugee camps: one at Sanghour, on the Persian Gulf near Bandar Abbas, the other at Kamiaran in Kermanshah province, close to the Iraqi border. There they waited until the Anfal was over and felt it was safe to return home.

There would, however, be no homes to return to, for virtually every structure in Halabja was levelled with dynamite and bulldozers after Iraqi forces finally retook the city. So, too, were Zamaqi and Anab, two camps that had been built on the outskirts of Halabja in the late 1970s to rehouse villagers from the destroyed border areas. So, too, was nearby Sayed Sadeq, a town of twenty thousand. In both Halabja and Sayed Sadeq, the electric substations were also dynamited. Even after the razing of Halabja, many bodies remained in the streets to rot where they had fallen four months earlier.

"The loss of Halabja is a regrettable thing," remarked Foreign Minister and Revolutionary Command Council member Tariq Aziz, adding, "Members of Jalal al-Talabani's group are in the area, and these traitors collaborate with the Iranian enemy." As the news of Halabja spread throughout Iraq, those who asked were told by Ba'athist officials that Iran had been responsible. A Kurdish student of English at Mosul University recalled his shock and disbelief at the news; he and his fellow Kurds were convinced that Iraqi government forces had carried out the attack but dared not protest for fear of arrest.

Not until July did the Iraqi regime move to recover Halabja, which was left under de facto Iranian control. In the days following the mass gassing, the Iranian government, well aware of the implications, ferried in journalists from Teheran, including foreigners. Their photographs, mainly of women, children, and elderly people huddled inertly in the streets or lying on their backs with mouths agape, circulated widely, demonstrating eloquently that the great mass of the dead had been Kurdish civilian noncombatants. Yet the numbers have remained elusive, with most reports continuing to cite Kurdish or Iranian estimates of at least 4,000 and as many as 7,000. The true figure was certainly in excess of 3,200, which was the total number of individual names collected in the course of systematic interviews with survivors.

First Anfal: 23 February - 19 March 1988



The First Anfal

Source: *Iraq's Crime of Genocide: The Anfal Campaign Against the Kurds*  
By Human Rights Watch/Middle East - 1995