

HUMAN TRAGEDY YET TO BE ADDRESSED IN BASHIR FOR ITS ORIGINAL TURKMEN INHABITANTS

Bashir is a Turkmen village situated 20 km south-west of Kerkuk, it is located on the Khassa river which takes its source in the mountains north of Kerkuk. It was built and developed in the center of a wide plain of fertile agricultural land which was cultivated by its inhabitants for producing cereals, fruits and vegetables as well as for animal farming, mainly ovine and bovine.

Bashir's inhabitants were all Turkmen, their ancestors had established themselves in the area and built the village several centuries ago, they had developed the village and constituted a well organized community where people lived in good harmony and cooperation with each other and in good intelligence with their neighbours until 1986 when they were expelled from their village and their land and properties were confiscated and given to Arabs brought from the center and south of Iraq, in application of a policy designed for the Arabization of the Turkmen towns and villages in Kerkuk province.

Bashir's inhabitants being farmers had exploited the land around the village for their needs and for that of their cattles for several decades without any restriction, limitation or interference from anybody, for the simple reason that they had no immediate or close neighbours in those days. They had no competitors for the large areas of agricultural lands around their village up to 1958.

During the Ottoman rule and after decades of cultivating their land, Bashir's inhabitants had registered their land officially in their names and were issued official land property certificates or "deeds". They renewed their land registration certificates and deeds during the early years of the newly founded Iraqi state in 1921.

From 1921 up to 1958 Bashir had grown bigger and its inhabitants enjoyed some economic growth which helped them improve the quality of their lives, they built a new school and a medical center. They started mecanizing and modernizing their tools and equipment, they bought tractors and harvesting machines which allowed them to extend their farms beyond their officially registered lands and to cultivate other lands at the borders of the village which were government owned and were not cultivated by anyone. These lands were called 'Amiri' lands the use of which required the payment of an extra yearly tax to the government.

In 1959, one year after the toppling of the monarchy in Iraq, a land reform law was issued to regulate land ownership restricting the use of "Amiri" lands in order to distribute them to the landless farmers. Gradually these "Amiri" lands were taken away from Bashir inhabitants to be given, in theory, to poor farmers. Unfortunately, all these "Amiri" lands fell under the control of some politically influential people, relatives of well known Arab and Kurdish feudals called Sheikhs and Aghas. That is how Bashir became a neighbour of some new Arab and Kurdish villages and how its lands became limited by those of its new Arab neighbours at the north and at the west and by those of its new Kurdish neighbours at the south.

Despite the loss of the 'Amiri' lands by Bashir's inhabitants, the mecanization of agriculture and the regular use of fertilizers starting in the early 1960s markedly improved their income. In addition, a new generation of young Bashir people graduated from institutes and colleges were appointed in well paid government jobs. This contributed to the social advancement of the villagers besides the economical improvement of their situation, to the point that in the 1970s Bashir had become a thriving Turkmen village of some 700 families (5.000 people) who owned some 48.000 donums (12.000 hectares) of farmland. The village had five schools, a good size hospital, a police station, several mosques, a potable water system and electricity supply to all the houses. All this improved the quality of life in the village and brought it close to that of a big town with acceptable standards.

In the early 1980s, after the start of the Irak-Iran war, and despite the enrolment of several hundreds of young men from Bashir in the army to fight against Iran, the security forces arrested hundreds of intellectuals from Bashir accusing them of being activists in the outlawed Islamic Da'wa Party, many of these intellectuals were later executed.

In 1986, the entire community was expelled from the village and their lands and houses were confiscated to be given to Arabs brought from central and south Iraq.

The tragedy is that while the Turkmen young men of Bashir were fighting the war against the Iranians, their families were subjected to the terrible human rights abuses of forced displacement and expulsion from their homes with confiscation of their lands and properties, without any valid reason or any legal justification! They were simply given 48 hours to pack their personal effects and leave their homes to move to some communal compounds on the road to Tikrit which had been built in a rush to serve as transitional residence for these forcibly displaced people.

After a year in these compounds almost all the families from Bashir were dispersed to cities throughout Iraq, like Basra, Diyala, Erbil, Kut etc. without being provided with housing and without any compensation for their lost houses and lands. One can only say that there are crimes which are more horrible than others and those committed against the Turkmen inhabitants of Bashir were the most horrible.

An ill designed policy of discrimination based on ethnic origin differences of the citizens of the same country (Iraq) has provided pretexts to the rulers of this country to commit horrible crimes against the Turkmen community in the north of Iraq where inhabitants of a thriving village like Bashir, all of whom landlords and productive farmers, have been punished with no reason whatsoever, apart from being Turkmen, to the maximum punishment of becoming refugees in their own country after having being stripped from all their belongings and lands. This unfair and dramatic decision which hit all of the 5.000 inhabitants of Bashir in 1986 has seriously affected them and completely changed the course of their lives. Stripping their basic human rights has made them poor and powerless, preventing them from achieving any of their goals.

Today, after almost 19 years of sufferings for Bashir inhabitants, the situation has not changed one iota, and their problem is still awaiting a solution, justice is slow and hesitant despite the change of regime in Iraq since almost two years!

We hope that your Human Rights Commission will bring the plight of the villagers of Bashir to the attention of the United Nations and the world democratic powers and that these will put pressure on the Iraqi government to promptly compensate the Bashir villagers for the loss of their properties and lands since 1986 and allow them to recuperate their lands which are still occupied by Arabs brought in by the former regime.

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Note: Bashir is not the only village which suffered from the Arabization policy in the Turkmen region, many other villages suffered from the same fate: Tirkalan, Yaichi...