

April 11, 2003

The News We Kept To Ourselves

By EASON JORDAN

Over the last dozen years I made 13 trips to Baghdad to lobby the government to keep CNN's Baghdad bureau open and to arrange interviews with Iraqi leaders. Each time I visited, I became more distressed by what I saw and heard -- awful things that could not be reported because doing so would have jeopardized the lives of Iraqis, particularly those on our Baghdad staff.

For example, in the mid-1990's one of our Iraqi cameramen was abducted. For weeks he was beaten and subjected to electroshock torture in the basement of a secret police headquarters because he refused to confirm the government's ludicrous suspicion that I was the Central Intelligence Agency's Iraq station chief. CNN had been in Baghdad long enough to know that telling the world about the torture of one of its employees would almost certainly have gotten him killed and put his family and co-workers at grave risk.

Working for a foreign news organization provided Iraqi citizens no protection. The secret police terrorized Iraqis working for international press services who were courageous enough to try to provide accurate reporting. Some vanished, never to be heard from again. Others disappeared and then surfaced later with whispered tales of being hauled off and tortured in unimaginable ways. Obviously, other news organizations were in the same bind we were when it came to reporting on their own workers.

We also had to worry that our reporting might endanger Iraqis not on our payroll. I knew that CNN could not report that Saddam Hussein's eldest son, Uday, told me in 1995 that he intended to assassinate two of his brothers-in-law who had defected and also the man giving them asylum, King Hussein of Jordan. If we had gone with the story, I was sure he would have responded by killing the Iraqi translator who was the only other participant in the meeting. After all, secret police thugs brutalized even senior officials of the Information Ministry, just to keep them in line (one such official has long been missing all his fingernails).

Still, I felt I had a moral obligation to warn Jordan's monarch, and I did so the next day. King Hussein dismissed the threat as a madman's rant. A few months later Uday lured the brothers-in-law back to Baghdad; they were soon killed.

I came to know several Iraqi officials well enough that they confided in me that Saddam Hussein was a maniac who had to be removed. One Foreign Ministry officer told me of a colleague who, finding out his brother had been executed by the regime, was forced, as a test of loyalty, to write a letter of congratulations on the act to Saddam Hussein. An aide to Uday once told me why he had no front teeth: henchmen had ripped them out with pliers and told him never to wear dentures, so he would always remember the price to be paid for upsetting his boss. Again, we could not broadcast anything these men said to us.

Last December, when I told Information Minister Muhammad Said al-Sahhaf that we intended to send reporters to Kurdish-controlled northern Iraq, he warned me they would "suffer the severest possible consequences." CNN went ahead, and in March, Kurdish officials presented us with evidence that they had thwarted an armed attack on our quarters in Erbil. This included videotaped confessions of two men identifying themselves as Iraqi intelligence agents who said their bosses in Baghdad told them the hotel actually housed C.I.A. and Israeli agents. The Kurds offered to let us interview the suspects on camera, but we refused, for fear of endangering our staff in Baghdad.

Then there were the events that were not unreported but that nonetheless still haunt me. A 31-year-old Kuwaiti woman, Asrar Qabandi, was captured by Iraqi secret police occupying her country in 1990 for "crimes," one of which included speaking with CNN on the phone. They beat her daily for two months, forcing her father to watch. In January 1991, on the eve of the American-led offensive, they smashed her skull and tore her body apart limb by limb. A plastic bag containing her body parts was left on the doorstep of her family's home.

I felt awful having these stories bottled up inside me. Now that Saddam Hussein's regime is gone, I suspect we will hear many, many more gut-wrenching tales from Iraqis about the decades of torment. At last, these stories can be told freely.

Eason Jordan is chief news executive at CNN.