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Halabja, the massacre the West tried to ignore



(Majid Karimian)

Richard Beeston surveys the aftermath of the attack on Halabja in 1988

Richard Beeston: comment

It has taken nearly 22 years for Ali Hassan al-Majid to be judged by Iraqis for perpetrating one of the worst massacres in modern history.

Even peering out from the smudged window of an Iranian military helicopter, it was clear that a terrible crime had been committed against the inhabitants of Halabja, as part of a campaign by Saddam Hussein and his commanders to teach Iraqi Kurds the cost of siding with the enemy — at that time Iran.

On the ground, the scale of the slaughter became clear. Entire families had been killed by the poison chemicals. Some died together huddled in makeshift shelters that offered no protection against the gas. One family was killed in their garden along with their pets.

Another succumbed as they tried to escape by car. We found the vehicle crashed into a wall with the driver and all occupants dead and the keys in the ignition. The most poignant memory of that day was a father in traditional Kurdish dress lying dead at the entrance to his home cradling a baby.

Those who survived were arguably worse off. Hundreds had been hit by mustard gas that burnt their eyes and lungs but did not kill them. Victims of this slow and painful poison are still dying of their injuries to this day.

Even by Saddam's ruthless standards the massacre broke new boundaries. Yet what was more shocking was the cynical response of the West. The US attempted to blame this crime on Iran. Britain carried on business as usual with the regime in Baghdad. Saddam was shielded from any meaningful punishment. He went on to invade Kuwait two years later and ordered the massacre of thousands of Iraqi Shia Muslims in 1991.

The failure of the West to respond adequately to this outrage made it difficult for George Bush and Tony Blair to make a moral case for overthrowing Saddam in 2003.

But as the Iraq war comes under new scrutiny and more voices argue that Saddam should have been left in place, it is worth sparing a thought for those thousands of innocent Kurdish men, women and children who died in the deadliest chemical weapons attack on civilians in history.

<http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/world/iraq/article6991512.ece?print=yes&randnum=1264027314832>