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Iraq is disintegrating as ethnic cleansing takes hold

Across central Iraq, there is an exodus of people fleeing for their lives as sectarian assassins and death squads hunt them down. At ground level, Iraq is disintegrating as ethnic cleansing takes hold on a massive scale.

By Patrick Cockburn in Khanaqin, North-East Iraq

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The state of Iraq now resembles Bosnia at the height of the fighting in the 1990s when each community fled to places where its members were a majority and were able to defend themselves. "Be gone by evening prayers or we will kill you," warned one of four men who called at the house of Leila Mohammed, a pregnant mother of three children in the city of Baquba, in Diyala province north-east of Baghdad. He offered chocolate to one of her children to try to find out the names of the men in the family.

Mrs Mohammed is a Kurd and a Shia in Baquba, which has a majority of Sunni Arabs. Her husband, Ahmed, who traded fruit in the local market, said: " They threatened the Kurds and the Shia and told them to get out. Later I went back to try to get our furniture but there was too much shooting and I was trapped in our house. I came away with nothing." He and his wife now live with nine other relatives in a three-room hovel in Khanaqin.

The same pattern of intimidation, flight and death is being repeated in mixed provinces all over Iraq. By now Iraqis do not have to be reminded of the consequences of ignoring threats.

In Baquba, with a population of 350,000, gunmen last week ordered people off a bus, separated the men from the women and shot dead 11 of them. Not far away police found the mutilated body of a kidnapped six-year-old boy for whom a ransom had already been paid.

The sectarian warfare in Baghdad is sparsely reported but the provinces around the capital are now so dangerous for reporters that they seldom, if ever, go there, except as embeds with US troops. Two months ago in Mosul, I met an Iraqi army captain from Diyala who said Sunni and Shia were slaughtering each other in his home province. "Whoever is in a minority runs," he said. "If forces are more equal they fight it out."

It was impossible to travel to Baquba, the capital of Diyala, from Baghdad without extreme danger of being killed on the road. But I thought that if I took the road from Kurdistan leading south, kept close to the Iranian border and stayed in Kurdish-controlled territory I could reach Khanaqin, a town of 75,000 people in eastern Diyala. If what the army captain said about the killings and mass flight was true then there were bound to be refugees who had reached there.

I thought it was too dangerous to go beyond the town into the Arab part of Diyala province, once famous for its fruit, since it is largely under insurgent control. But, as I had hoped, it was possible to talk to Kurds who had sought refuge in Khanaqin over the past month.

Salam Hussein Rostam, a police lieutenant in charge of registering and investigating people arriving in terror from all over Iraq, gestured to an enormous file of paper beside him. "I've received 200 families recently, most of them in the last week," he said. This means that about one thousand people have sought refuge in one small town. Lt Rostam said that the refugees were coming from all over Iraq. In some cases they had left not because they were threatened with death but because they were fired from their jobs for belonging to the wrong community. "I know of two health workers from Baghdad who were sacked simply because they were Kurds and not Shia," he said.

This was probably because the Health Ministry in Baghdad is controlled by the party of Muqtada al-Sadr, the Shia cleric.

The flight of the middle class started about six months after the invasion in 2003 as it became clear Iraq was becoming more, not less, violent. They moved to Jordan, Syria and Egypt. The suicide bombing campaign was largely directed against Shias who only began to retaliate after they had taken over the government in May last year. Interior Ministry forces arrested, tortured and killed Sunnis.

But a decisive step towards sectarian civil war took place when the Shia Al-Askari shrine in Samarra was blown up on 22 February this year. Some 1,300 Sunni were killed in retaliation.

Kadm Darwish Ali, a policeman from Baquba and now also a refugee, said: " Everything got worse after Samarra. I had been threatened with death before but now I felt every time I appeared in the street I was likely to die."

Every community has its atrocity stories. The cousin of a friend was a Sunni Arab who worked in the wholly Shia district of Qadamiyah in

west Baghdad. One day last month he disappeared. Three days later his body was discovered on a rubbish dump in another Shia district. "His face was so badly mutilated," said my friend, that "we only knew it was him from a wart on his arm."

Since the destruction of the mosque in Samarra sectarian warfare has broken out in every Iraqi city where there is a mixed population. In many cases the minority is too small to stand and fight. Sunnis have been fleeing Basra after a series of killings. Christians are being eliminated in Mosul in the north. Shias are being killed or driven out of cities and towns north of Baghdad such as Baquba or Samarra itself.

Dujail, 40 miles north of Baghdad, is the Shia village where Saddam Hussein is accused of carrying out a judicial massacre, killing 148 people after an attempt to assassinate him in 1982. He is on trial for the killings. The villagers are now paying a terrible price for giving evidence at his trial.

In the past few months Sunni insurgents have been stopping them at an improvised checkpoint on the road to Baghdad. Masked gunmen glance at their identity cards and if under place of birth is written "Dujail" they kill them. So far 20 villagers have been murdered and 20 have disappeared.

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