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It is hard to rank the likely victims of a war in Iraq, but there can be little doubt that the 4 million Kurds of Iraq, who for the moment have achieved unusual progress in the northern enclaves under the uneasy alliance of Masoud Barzani and Jalal Talabani, are in particular danger.

Anders Lustgarten may prove to be right in his warning that "none stand to lose more than the occupants of Iraqi Kurdistan," and that "any successor to Saddam will see the Kurdish threat to Baghdad in the same light". Apart from their vulnerability to murderous Iraqi assault, and the anticipated Turkish reaction if there is any hint of a move towards meaningful autonomy, some 60 per cent rely for survival on the UN 'Oil for Food' programme, according to studies by humanitarian organizations, which is likely to be severely disrupted in the event of war.

"Free Kurdistan is like a huge refugee camp," one Kurdish leader commented: it is dependent on UN-run programmes for food and on Baghdad for fuel and power. The UN High Commissioner for Refugees is planning for the possible flight of hundreds of thousands to neighbouring countries, where they are not likely to receive a warm welcome, and where the prospects

for the indigenous Kurdish populations are sufficiently grim even without what might lie ahead.

But there are some real signs of hope in the Middle East.

It is obvious that the rich and powerful countries, primarily the US and Britain, will have an enormous influence on future development, as they have had in the past. And in free societies, where fear of repression is slight, that means that popular forces and independent organizations like the Kurdish Human Rights Project can have a decisive influence. For 10 years the KHRP has compiled a stellar record in promoting and significantly advancing the cause of human rights in this tortured part of the world. In the coming years, its tasks will be even greater, and its concerns will reach well beyond the Kurds, severe as their problems are.

Other reasons for hope are internal to societies where severe repression and violence reign. I was greatly privileged to catch a glimpse of this in Turkey a few months ago when I visited Istanbul and Diyarbakir, the capital of the Kurdish southeast. Much to my surprise, I came back feeling far more optimistic than when I went. It was truly inspiring to witness first-hand the courage and dedication of the leading artists, writers, academics, journalists, publishers and others who carry on the daily struggle for freedom of speech and human rights, not just with statements but also with regular acts of civil disobedience. Some have spent a good part of their lives in Turkish prisons because of their insistence on recording the true history of the miserably oppressed Kurdish population: sociologist Ismail Besikci, to mention one notorious case, was arrested 11 years ago for publishing a book on state terror in Turkey, having already spent 15 years in prison. He also refused a $10,000 prize from the US Fund for Free Expression in protest against Washington's strong support for Turkish repression, which is virtually unknown in the West, in accord with the standard principle that one's own crimes must be effaced.

Unlike Dr. Besikci, the first Kurdish woman elected to Turkey's parliament, Leyla Zana, did not refuse the Sakharov Prize for freedom of thought seven years ago. As she wrote when she received it, "the jailers who lock my body behind the thick walls of an Ankara prison do not have the power to prevent my spirit from travelling freely." She is still serving a 15-year sentence for having worn traditional Kurdish colours and for her crime when she took her oath of office in 1991. She read it in Turkish as required but then added in Kurdish: "I shall struggle so that the Kurdish and Turkish people can live peacefully together in a democratic framework." Just last week, Amnesty International renewed its appeal to the Turkish authorities to release her. As in the case of other courageous and prominent dissidents in Western domains, including those who were brutally murdered, her name is virtually unknown in Britain and the United States.

There seems to be a good deal of public support in Turkey for the people who are carrying out the struggle for free speech and human rights, people who should inspire not only great respect but also humility among their Western colleagues. No less inspiring was what I saw on a visit to Diyarbakir, where many of those driven from the countryside live in caves in the outer walls of the city and in its slums, still barred from return to their villages despite programmes that have been officially announced but not implemented. Human Rights Watch described this non-implementation as perhaps the most serious of the current human rights violations in Turkey. Conditions appear to be even worse for the unknown numbers trying to survive in condemned buildings in miserable slums of Istanbul, where large families are crammed into a room, young children are virtually imprisoned unable to venture into the grim alleyways outside, while some older brothers and sisters work in illegal factories to help keep the family alive.

The courage of the people is beyond my ability to describe, from the children in the streets wearing Kurdish colours — a se-

rious offence, for which punishment of the families could be severe — to the members of a large and enthusiastic public meeting I attended in Diyarbakir. At the end, several students came forward and in front of TV and police cameras, presented me with a Kurdish-English dictionary. That was an act of considerable bravery, and a precious gift; right at that time students and their parents were being interrogated, reportedly tortured, and facing imprisonment for submitting legal petitions requesting the right to have elective courses in their native language.

Denial of even these minimal rights is cruel beyond words. The Kurds have the support of many brave and honourable people in Turkey. They ask only that we offer them every form of assistance within our reach, and that we do what we can to help them achieve their worthy and justified aims — which means, in particular, putting an end to our critically important contribution to the repression and violence to which they are subjected.

There have been some real effects of internal struggle and outside pressure. In August 2002, the Turkish Parliament passed new laws that have a good deal of promise. The new government subsequently extended them in ways that could prove important. Recent KHRP newsletters outline both the promise and the barriers to its realization, calling on us to support the people of Turkey in overcoming the repressive acts of the Turkish state.

The current record is mixed. There is general agreement that day-to-day repression has been mitigated. On the other hand, the report released by the respected Izmir Bar Association for Human Rights Day records increases in human rights violations (as throughout the world, under the pretext of combating terrorism), including hundreds of credible reports of torture, thousands of trials for 'thought crimes', a continuation of the 'situation of emergency rules' despite the formal lifting, the bars against return to the villages, and other serious abuses.

The Publishers Union of Turkey reported a "rising trend" of banning of books and accusations against authors and publishers, as well as music and other publications. Kurds and Kurdish issues remain the primary targets, but are not the only ones; even a dictionary about women's slang was banned, also a grammar and dictionary of a local Greek dialect.

A great many people in Turkey heed Leyla Zana's call "to struggle so that the Kurdish and Turkish people can live peacefully together in a democratic framework." They need our support, and with it, there might even come a day when Turkey will be the "homeland for Turks and Kurds" — the phrase used by Ataturk's lieutenant and eventual successor at the foundation of the Turkish nation-state 80 years ago.