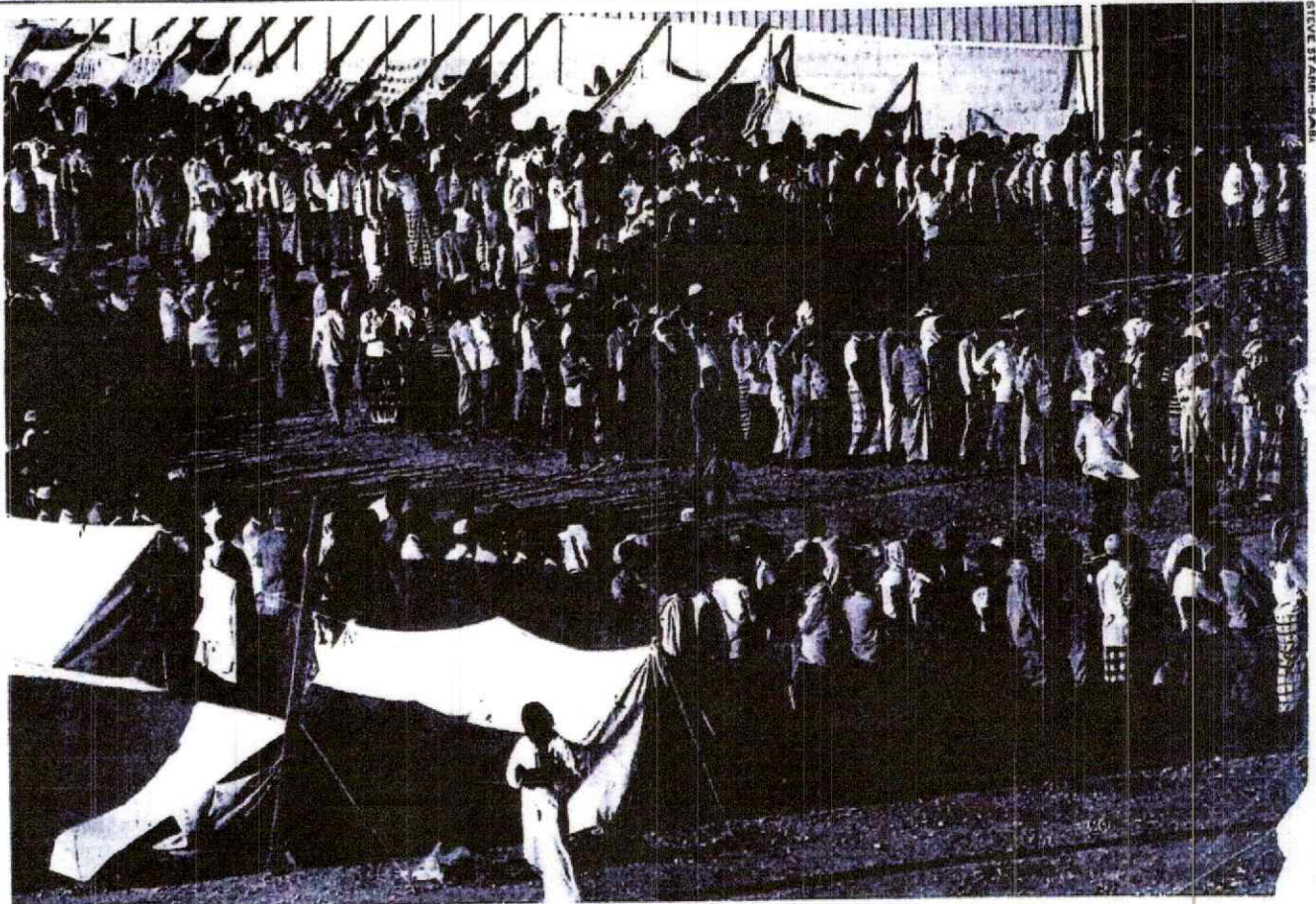


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The Gulf



Once they earned good wages, but now they languish in sprawling, sweltering tent cities infested with snakes and scorpions

Article based on official information from Bernd Jaenicke, UN coordinator

On the Edge of Tragedy

Trapped in a scorching wasteland between Jordan and Iraq and growing in number every day, tens of thousands of refugees struggle to survive

By JON D. HULL SHAALAN ONE

Melia Tabono lies semiconscious on a cot, her swollen face glistening with sweat and sand. An intravenous tube drips saline solution into her veins, as a friend, Thelma Nonatura, a fellow Filipino, desperately fans a piece of cardboard to combat the 35° heat. Six weeks ago, Tabono, 38, worked as a seamstress in Kuwait City. Now she is among tens of thousands of refugees struggling to survive in a strip of scorched desert between Iraq and Jordan. "Our lives have been destroyed," murmurs Nonatura. "I can't feel anything anymore."

In the next cot an elderly Sri Lankan woman shakes uncontrollably, her frail body racked by thirst, hunger and the blistering heat. "I've never seen anything like this," says Dr. Khaled Abu-Halimeh of the Jordanian Red Crescent Society, who treats

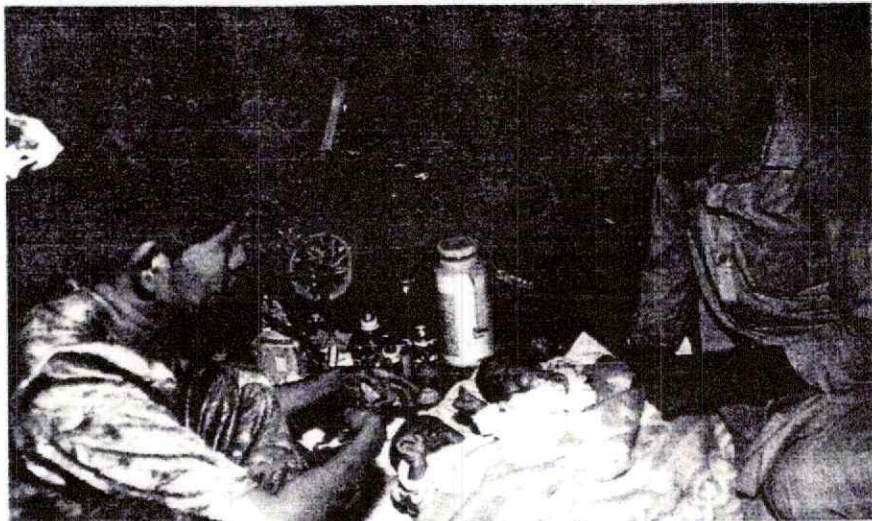
60 patients a day in the makeshift medical tent. "Without more water, medicine and food, we'll be faced with a disaster."

While some of the Western hostages anxiously await chartered jets out of Baghdad, more than 70,000 refugees are trapped in a 70-km-wide swath of no-man's-land between Jordan and Iraq. Largely from India, the Philippines, Pakistan and Bangladesh, these refugees once worked in Kuwait at jobs the natives disdained: as drivers, waiters and maids. Though never wealthy, they earned good wages and had become accustomed to the air-conditioned placidity of their adopted country. Today they languish in three sprawling, filthy tent cities, called Shaalan One, Two and Three, erected in a sweltering moonscape infested with snakes and scorpions. At least 10 refugees, including two babies, have already died of dehydration and exposure. Says Xavier Emman-

uelli, president of the French relief organization Doctors Without Borders: "These people are hostages of the desert."

Every day brings 15,000 to 20,000 more refugees pouring out of Iraq, and Jordanian officials predict that as many as 1 million more may arrive in the coming weeks. Apart from the massive crowds in the border camps, Jordan is swamped with 110,000 refugees packed into dozens of transit camps in Amman. The cash-starved kingdom insists that it cannot cope with the additional tens of thousands still stranded at the border, waiting to cross. "The plight of these people has only evoked the faintest of responses from the world community," complains Crown Prince Hassan, King Hussein's brother.

So far, 250,000 refugees have been repatriated through Jordan, most of them Egyptians traveling by plane and ship from the port of Aqaba. The number of daily



Parents care for their newborn infants amid the refugees stranded in Amman



A hostage of the desert seeks relief

flights from Amman has doubled from 50 to 100 in an effort to evacuate the refugees. India is averaging six flights a day, while Pakistan, which has resettled about 7,000 citizens, sent a passenger ship to Aqaba last week. The International Organization for Migration has launched a \$50 million airlift program to aid Sri Lankans, Bangladeshis and others whose impoverished countries have offered little help.

Despite donations of more than \$100 million in food, supplies and cash grants from dozens of governments and charity

groups, the relief effort remains confused and inadequate. No central authority appears in control, and the distribution of food and water is dangerously disorganized.

At the Shaalan One camp, civility ends when the water truck arrives. As cries of "Water! Water!" erupt in a babel of languages from hundreds of parched throats, men and women battle their way to the nozzle of the tanker. One feverish man grabs a stone and threatens to bash a competitor's skull. Meanwhile, most of the precious liquid spills on the ground and vanishes into the sand.

Dehydration is the most critical problem in the camps. Jordanian officials say they are supplying water as quickly as they can, but it is simply not fast enough. Dozens of men holding buckets gather around a dry water hose attached to a water tank, their faces expressing a fear just short of panic. "Please, we've been standing here for nine hours waiting for water," says Romis Ali, 45, a Bangladeshi who worked at the Meridien Hotel in Kuwait City. Ali, in his second week at the camp, hasn't had anything to drink in 20 hours. He had his last meal, a slice of stale bread, two days ago.

Each day at noon, huge lines form behind relief trucks carrying the daily rations of pita bread, tomatoes, cucumbers and cheese. Beneath a tarp of sheets and blankets, Mashama Nawaz, 35, a Pakistani, sits with his wife and three children. His daughter, only two, sleeps on the ground, as relatives try to keep her cool. "Yesterday they gave me one piece of bread and three tomatoes," says Nawaz. "I kept telling them I have children to feed, and they kept saying 'We are sorry.'"

Shouts of excitement greet the arrival of two Jordanian entrepreneurs driving a pickup truck loaded with ice. A brick-size chunk goes for one Jordanian dinar (about \$1.50), and the sellers profit handsomely—though not as well as they might. Many of the refugees are penniless, forced to leave their life savings behind in Kuwaiti bank accounts long since looted by Iraqi troops.

Just beyond the truck, a miniature desert tornado forms, funneling sand toward the cloudless sky and scattering garbage as it dances through the camp. "We are not poor people who can live in the desert," says Mohammed Tahir, 30, who worked for 12 years in Kuwait in an Indian restaurant. "We had jobs and apartments and good lives." Tahir has been in no-man's-land for seven days. As frightened as he was by life in Kuwait after the Iraqi invasion, Tahir insists there is no comparison. He says, "I have come to a place that is even worse than what I left behind."

—With reporting by Jamil Hamadi/Ruweished

Saddam's VIP Guests

Among the spoils of war that fell into Iraq's hands when its troops stormed Kuwait were 17 prisoners who had been serving sentences ranging from five years to life in a Kuwait City jail. The convicts turned out to be a valuable prize. The 17, all linked to the Shi'ite terrorist group Islamic Jihad, were convicted for killing six people in the 1983 bombings of the U.S. and French embassies and other targets in the Kuwaiti capital. Islamic Jihad, which has ties to Iran, has repeatedly demanded freedom for the 17 prisoners as one of the conditions for the release of Western hostages held in Lebanon.

The most common theory is that the prisoners are being kept in a Baghdad hotel, where they are free to come and go

but not to leave the city. There were unconfirmed reports last week that two Lebanese members of the group had already returned to Lebanon. Western terrorism experts believe Saddam could be especially interested in one of the prisoners, Mustafa Badreddin, a Syrian-trained explosives expert who is the brother-in-law of Imad Mughniyah, a Lebanese terrorist and suspected kidnapper identified as the mastermind behind the 1985 hijacking of TWA Flight 847. Originally scheduled to fly from Athens to Rome, the plane was eventually taken to Beirut, where Robert Dean Stethem, a U.S. Navy diver who was a passenger on the flight, was beaten and shot to death. Saddam conceivably could try to enlist Mustafa and his colleagues in terrorist acts against the U.S., release them to Iran as a goodwill gesture or keep them as a trump card in negotiations with the West.