

**“Violence, Memory and Dealing with the Past in Iraq”
Conference and public discussion on occasion of the 20th anniversary of the Anfal
operations against the Kurdish population in Iraq
17th of April 2008, Berlin**

**HAUKARI – Association for International Cooperation, Frankfurt/M.- Berlin
Centre for Modern Oriental Studies, Berlin**

BRIEF REPORT

This year the Kurdish population in Iraq is commemorating the 20th anniversary of the so called Anfal operations. Anfal was the codeword used by the Iraqi regime for a vast military operation against the Kurdish population in the Iraq-Iran-Turkey border regions in 1988. Thousands of villages were destroyed, the population gathered and transported to prisons and camps. More than 100 000 young men and women were deported - from most of them there is no trace until today. The economic and social situation of the survivors, among them a big number of women, whose husbands and often all male relatives disappeared during Anfal, is precarious until today. For now 20 years they have been waiting; first for the return of their beloved ones; now, after the fall of the Baath-regime in 2003, for the opening of mass graves and evidence on the fate of their beloved ones, for justice, compensation and support in the development of new life perspectives.

On the 17th of April 2008 the German NGO HAUKARI e.V. and the Centre for Modern Oriental studies invited to a workshop and a public discussion on **“Violence, Memory and Dealing with the Past in Iraq . 20 years after the Anfal operations in Kurdistan: The survivors’ perspective”**. The conference was prepared in cooperation with the Heinrich Boell Foundation and the German Middle East Studies Association for Contemporary Research and Documentation (DAVO) and funded by the German Federal Foreign Office - project zivik. Ca. 40 members of human rights and development organizations and researchers participated in the afternoon workshop.

At the heart of the conference were the appalling and shaking testimonies of two Anfal surviving women from the Germian area in Kurdistan-Iraq: **Mrs. Shazada Hussein** Mohammed has lost her husband and most of her male relatives during Anfal, was imprisoned herself for months and survived with her daughter only. Until today she is living in one of the camps erected by the Baath-regime for the deported population. She is now active in self help groups of Anfal surviving women and was one of the testimonies on Anfal in the Iraqi Special Tribunal against Saddam Hussein and his followers. **Mrs. Gulnaz Aziz Qadir** was 17 when Anfal happened, many of her relatives disappeared. Today she is a member of the Kurdistan Regional Parliament and active in the working group for Anfal survivors. Both women reported on the extreme violence suffered through the Anfal campaigns as well as on the precarious living situation especially of women among the survivors. Until today their lives are provisional due to the uncertainty on the fate of their disappeared relatives. Their main demand is therefore international supported for the opening of mass graves in Iraq and the return and burial of the bodies of their beloved ones. They also asked for international acknowledgement of the Anfal operations against the Kurdish population as genocide and compensation not only by the Iraqi government but also by those international companies supporting the Baath-regime at the time.

Their testimonies and demands were complemented by the Kurdish poet and researcher **Dr. Choman Hardi**. She presented the findings of a research on the situation of Anfal surviving women in Kurdistan, underlining the taboo and silence lying on their specific experiences of sexual abuse and rape in the prisons, of giving birth to children and losing children during imprisonment and reporting about the feelings of guilt in many surviving women, because they could not protect their children.

Dr. David Bloomfield, director of the Glenree centre for Peace and Reconciliation, Ireland, and longstanding expert in reconciliation headed and moderated the workshop. Commenting on the strong statements of the Anfal surviving women, he underlined, that victims are not paralyzed persons and do not need international experts to speak for them. Reconciliation starts from the victims, not from the offenders. Victims have to be at the heart of the reconciliation process. Dr. Bloomfield stressed the difference between reconciliation and forgiveness. Forgiveness can be a gift from the victims to the offenders, but is not a precondition for a process of reconciliation.

After the shattering testimonies the audience felt, that everything had been said by the victims themselves and there should be enough space for them to enter in discussion with the participants. Therefore other foreseen speakers, **Dr. Andrea Fischer-Tahir**, Centre for Modern Oriental Studies (ZMO) and **Karin Mlodoch**, HAUKARI e.V. and ZMO, withdrew or shortened their contributions. Karin Mlodoch briefly pointed out, how the process of dealing with the past in Iraq is being delayed by ongoing violence and occupation, the conflict among different ethnic, religious and political factions on the ownership on interpreting and dealing with the past and by rising competition between victims of past crimes and victims of current violence.

Shazada Hussein Mohammed gave a report on her testimony at the tribunal against Saddam Hussein. While her testimony was an important experience for her personally, she criticized that Saddam Hussein was not sentenced and executed for the Anfal crimes.

The following intense discussion concentrated on the tribunal against Saddam Hussein, the 1991 amnesty for Kurdish collaborators with the regime and the demands of the survivors towards the international community.

In the evening discussion more than 80 participants shared the testimonies of Shazada Hussein Mohammed and Gulnaz Aziz Qadir and the contributions of Dr. Hardi and Dr. Bloomfield. The session had been opened by a documentary film on the situation of Anfal surviving women in Germian area, in which Mrs. Mohammed and Mrs. Qadir had participated.

Although most of the participants in both, workshop and public discussion, were already familiar with the Anfal operations and their impact on the Kurdish and Iraqi society, many of them were deeply impressed by the survivors' own experience and perspective. For Mrs. Mohammed and Mrs. Qadir said, they felt encouraged by finding a platform for their experiences and demands in Germany. In meetings with representative of the Iraqi working group at the Federal Foreign Office and with members of HAUKARI, ZMO and medico intentional after the conference, they asked for specific supports for two initiatives:

1. to identify and charge those German companies involved with the Baath-regime in the production of chemical gas and other weapons and .
2. to develop and construct a memorial for Anfal victims with participation of the survivors themselves.

For the latter idea the women felt encouraged and inspired by visits to several locations of memory in Germany. The most impressive visit for them was to the former Nazi concentration camp for women in Ravensbrück. Here they participated in the ceremony for the 63rd anniversary of the liberation of the camp. They were welcomed by Mrs. Eschebach, the director of the memorial, in her opening speech and had occasion for exchange with survivors of the Ravensbrück prison from different countries, among them the head of the International Committee of former Ravensbrück Prisoners, Mrs. Simone Gournay from France. In her speech at the ceremony she had talked about the long way back to a normal life after the release from the concentration camp. An experience shared by Shazada Mohammed Hussein. She resumed: "It was an important and moving acknowledgment for us to be here with these extraordinary women. And it was a look beyond our own experience, beyond our own walls, to find, we do share so many things. The Anfal memorial we are thinking of, should as well be a place of dialogue and exchange."

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