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*Article Content*

THREATS AND RESPONSES: THE GREAT ESCAPES; Hussein and Mobs Virtually Empty Iraq's Prisons

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Tens of thousands of Iraqi prisoners stormed out of their cells to freedom today after President Saddam Hussein declared an amnesty that appeared to have all but emptied a sprawling, nationwide network of prisons that have served as the grim charnel houses of one of the world's harshest police states.

At the Abu Ghraib prison, a sprawling compound on the desert floor 20 miles west of Baghdad that has become a notorious symbol of fear among Iraqis for its history of mass executions and allegations of torture, the heavy steel gates gave way under the crush of a huge crowd of relatives who rushed to the jail within an hour of the amnesty broadcast. All semblance of order vanished as a cheering mob surged through the compound, in some cases joining prison guards in smashing cell-block walls to free weeping inmates. But some inmates were killed in the chaos today.

The scenes were repeated at other prisons across the country, including the Khadhemiya prison for women in Baghdad, and those in other major cities, including Basra in the south and Mosul and Kirkuk in the north.

Mr. Hussein's decree specified that committees of judges would have 48 hours to rule on individual releases, excepting only ''Zionist and American spies,'' murderers who have not settled the ''blood money'' owed to victims' families under Islamic legal precepts, and debtors who have not satisfied their creditors. But the mob scenes that developed at Abu Ghraib and elsewhere appeared to have overwhelmed the prisons and caused a mass exodus.

Mr. Hussein's reasons for emptying the prisons were shrouded in the blanket of secrecy that envelops much in Iraq. A statement issued in his name described the move as a gesture of gratitude to Iraq's 22 million people for re-electing him president last week in a ballot that yielded an official return of 100 percent for the only candidate.

But much else suggested that the growing threat of war with the United States may have spurred what is undoubtedly the most punitive government in the Arab world toward a sudden gesture of magnanimity.

Among Iraqi exiles, the common view was that President Bush, in demanding the ouster of Mr. Hussein, has already struck at the foundations of his power, by serving notice that the days of the 65-year-old president, an absolute ruler since he seized power in 1979, may be numbered by America's military might.

In this view, opening the prisons was a dramatic last-ditch reach for popularity -- a signal to Iraqis that Mr. Hussein is now ready to become a herald of a new and more tolerant Iraq, and to put behind him the image Mr. Bush sketched in a speech two weeks ago in which he explained his reasons for threatening a military strike on Iraq, when he called him a ''dictator,'' a ''student of Stalin'' and a man who uses ''murder as a tool of terror.''

Other Iraqis suggested privately that there might be more hard-headed reasons: the need to bolster loyalty in the army and state security forces, which have seen much of their leadership decimated over the years in purges; possibly, too, the need to stiffen resolve in the military by boosting recruitment and staunching desertions.

Diplomats in Baghdad with memories of the rapid collapse of Communist power across Eastern Europe in 1989 said Mr. Hussein and his aging inner circle in the Revolutionary Command Council may be drawing on that experience, concerned that the specter of war with the United States could cause a crumbling of loyalties that could bring the government tumbling down from within.

But the Eastern European example, and the scenes of frenzy that developed at Abu Ghraib, suggested that gestures by autocratic regimes to release pressure can have unexpected results, signaling to people who have lived for years in fear of the state that their rulers may be wavering, and that ordinary people, gathered in large numbers, can take power into their own hands. That lesson seemed unavoidable today, as the crowds forced some cell blocks open, while jailers mostly stood passively by.

At Abu Ghraib, hysteria among the crowds of relatives gave way to jubilation, and in some cases to grief, as fathers, mothers, brothers, sisters and children searched frantically for loved ones, some of whom had been imprisoned for 30 years and more. Outside half a dozen vast cell blocks, sobbing reunions mixed with scenes of implacable grief as those hoping to find relatives who had disappeared into the state security system years ago wandered with increasing desperation from block to block, their hopes evaporating as the day passed into night.

''I cannot find my son, God help me,'' a woman named Sabiha muttered, as she wandered aimlessly in a black cloak and headdress outside a compound known as the Special Judgment Block. Set apart in the northeastern corner of the prison compound, the block has been used to house political prisoners, some of whom were awaiting execution when the amnesty came, others of whom had been held for years in suspense, never knowing when their hour for the gallows might come. The 62-year-old woman said her son, Saad, 42, had been imprisoned at Abu Ghraib for 10 years, but in her confusion and fright she could no longer remember what crime he had been seized for, nor even what his sentence was.

As dusk drew in at Abu Ghraib, with tens of thousands of people still defying loudspeaker calls for the prison compound to be cleared, it was clear that a day that began for many with a fantastical turnaround of a kind most Iraqis could only have summoned in their dreams -- Mr. Hussein, architect of a merciless penal system, seemingly pulling it down at a stroke -- had ended in still more tragedy. Several prisoners were killed in one cell block, probably by suffocation as guards pushed them back and other prisoners surged forward. Relatives wailed in misery as they knelt beside the bodies, some appealing to Allah, others trying to resuscitate the dead. Others carried their dead away, women screaming in grief at the sight of their husbands and brothers and sons lying dead at the moment of their liberation.

The government gave no figures on the numbers of those eligible for release. But a reading of the amnesty terms, coupled with estimates of the prison population made in recent years by Western human rights groups like Amnesty International, suggested that figures of 100,000, possibly as many as 150,000, might not be exaggerated. The rights groups have said Iraq's prison population has been swollen by tens of thousands of political detainees as well as by tens of thousands of others convicted of ordinary criminal offenses in a system that can give an offender a 15-year sentence for stealing $2 worth of groceries.

In one measure of the prison overcrowding, Mr. Hussein was reported by defectors from the penal system reaching the West to have ordered a ''prison cleansing'' campaign in the late 1990's, aimed at reducing the prison population, that resulted in thousands of executions of inmates serving terms of at little as eight years. Many of those executions were reported to have taken place at Abu Ghraib.

A hint that Mr. Hussein might be considering a new, gentler guise came in the speech at his inauguration for his new seven-year presidential term on Thursday, when he said that he favored ''forgiveness'' for ''wrongdoers,'' and that as ''the holder of the bucket'' he was disposed to assuage the need of ''clear and sweet water from the well.'' Then today, the state radio announced at mid-morning that he had reached a decision that would bring ''great happiness'' to all Iraq.

Scores of foreign reporters who were admitted to Iraq for the presidential referendum were ordered from their hotels to the Information Ministry, then formed into a motorcade for a 100-mile-an-hour dash along a six-lane highway leading west out of the city. Only when the lead vehicle turned off to Abu Ghraib, a compound at least a mile wide and a mile deep that lies in an area just north of highway, did it become clear what Mr. Hussein's decree involved.

The document, read repeatedly on the state broadcasting system the rest of the day, specified a ''general, comprehensive and final amnesty'' for all Iraqis sentenced to imprisonment, whether in Iraq or among the two million who have fled abroad during Mr. Hussein's 23 years in power. Previous prison amnesties by him, some on his birthdays in April, have involved small numbers or modest cuts in sentences. But this time, the ruling was sweeping, including all prisoners facing death sentences and terms of life imprisonment, all those accused of crimes and all detainees.

''The amnesty covers all crimes, no matter what the kind and level of crime,'' the decree said, including crimes committed in military service and those involving ''fugitives for political reasons'' -- a group that includes many Iraqi exiles living elsewhere in the Middle East and in Europe and the United States. By including those exiles -- who number among them dozens of men who served in senior positions in Mr. Hussein's armed forces, state security police and intelligence services -- the Iraqi leader appeared to be trying to lure back to Iraq men who have joined exile opposition organizations like the Iraqi National Congress, a C.I.A-financed group that has been drawn into the Bush administration's discussions on a successor government in Baghdad if an American-led invasion topples him.

As the crowds began to gather outside Abu Ghraib, prison officials sketched in other provisions. One was the ban on any release for ''Zionist and American spies,'' a term that has often been used to justify the arrest and execution of opponents of the government.

The Baghdad judge appointed to oversee the release at Abu Ghraib, Abdul Hassan Shandal Issa, sweating in his heavy business suit in the 100-degree heat, said another provision called for the release of all non-Iraqi Arabs. This prompted a barrage of questions about the 605 missing persons from Kuwait and other countries that Kuwait and the United Nations say were seized by the Iraqis during their occupation of Kuwait, which was ended by American-led military action in 1991.

''It includes Kuwaitis,'' one Iraqi official said, but he declined to say whether any of those on Kuwait's list were to be released. For years, up to last week, the Baghdad government has been saying it ''lost track'' of the people sought by Kuwait during the chaos that developed as Iraqi troops raced to evacuate Kuwait ahead of advancing American troops. It has also said it has no record of the American serviceman listed by the State Department as ''missing/believed captured'' from the 1991 war, Lt. Cmdr. Scott Speicher of the Navy. At the prison today, Mr. Issa and the prison governor, Ali Ahmed Abdullah al-Jabouri, ignored questions about the American officer.

For two hours, as the crowds gathered in their thousands outside the gates, the prison release looked like it was turning into a rally for Mr. Hussein. Young men, apparently government supporters, led relatives of the prisoners in firing Kalashnikov rifles into the air, holding portraits of the Iraqi leader high above the crush, and in ceaseless rhythmic chants, including the cry that dominated at the polls last week, ''Our blood, our soul, we sacrifice to you, Saddam.'' Older family members, looking almost paralyzed by fear and reluctant to give their names or those of their imprisoned relatives, stood back. But they, too, spoke passionately about Mr. Hussein.

A 68-year-old retired high school mathematics teacher, who gave her first name as Samiya, said she heard of the amnesty while driving across Baghdad, and headed straight for Abu Ghraib in the hope that her 59-year-old brother, a chemical engineer serving a 30-year prison term, would be freed. When asked if her brother was a political prisoner, the white-haired woman turned away, then said he was the victim of denunciation by a ''jealous colleague'' at work. Then, she launched into an encomium for Mr. Hussein. ''We love our president because he forgives the mistakes of his people,'' she said.

Once the prison gates collapsed, the mood changed. Seeing watchtowers abandoned and the prison guards standing passively by or actively supporting them as they charged into the cell blocks, the crowd seemed to realize that they were experiencing, if only briefly, a new Iraq, where the people, not the government, was sovereign. Chants of ''Down Bush! Down Sharon!'' referring to Prime Minister Ariel Sharon of Israel, faded. In one cell block, a guard smiled broadly at an American photographer, raised his thumb, and said, ''Bush! Bush!'' Elsewhere, guards offered an English word almost never heard in Iraq. ''Free!'' they said. ''Free!''