

Marshes revive in post-war Iraq, but for many, the traditional ways of life are gone

'We used to live on fish, melons and tomatoes. Now the water is salty and all I have is my military pension'

Alistair Lyon
Reuters

HWAIR, Iraq: Water is reflooding parts of the Iraqi wetlands drained by Saddam Hussein to deny refuge to Shiite rebels, but the communities displaced by war and oppression may never recreate their old way of life.

Ole Jepsen, an adviser in Iraq's Coalition Provisional Authority in the south, said 30 to 40 percent of the marshes had been reflooded since US-led forces toppled Saddam Hussein a year ago. "This is more than anyone expected."

Jepsen said some 200,000 refugees from southern Iraq had returned, though not all to their ancestral homes.

"We prefer to stay here," said Qasim Hassan, who returned last year from Iran and now lives in a shack beside a broad canal built on Saddam's orders to drain the marshes. "There is nothing where we used to live. Even if the water comes back, we have no money to buy animals or seeds."

His family survives on government food rations.

The marshes covered 10,000 square kilometers before Saddam gouged out the Victory Canal between the Tigris and Euphrates during the 1980-88 war with Iran, when whole communities fled the fighting.

As the water receded, the people whose lives revolved around fish, water buffalo, rice and reeds were evicted or fled,

mostly to Iran. The wetlands that cleansed Iraq's great rivers and sustained myriad migrant birds were blighted.

In a hamlet near Hwair, 70 kilometers northwest of Basra, returned refugees were making reed mats, but said much of their former livelihood was gone.

"The water is rising beyond the dyke, which is good as this water is useless," said Aziz Nasr, 19, gesturing to stagnant pools near his mud brick home. "We want the dyke to be repaired and raised to protect our houses. Now we prefer access by road, not boats."

His grandmother, Thuhriya Kadhim, dreams of electricity, a refrigerator, a fan - and a house made of bricks, not mud. "We want to plant date palms," she said. "We could... have something to pass on to the children."

Striking a balance between environmental restoration and the wishes of returning villagers poses a challenge.

Jepsen, CPA coordinator for food, agriculture and irrigation, said many people want to cultivate land, not just rely on fishing and buffalo milk. They were attached to their traditional culture, but also hankered after schools, clinics, roads, electricity and links with the rest of Iraq.

"There are studies on which areas to reflood, which to irrigate for farming and which to keep dry," said CPA spokeswoman Paola Della Casa. "There are pilot projects on soil, salinity and the eco-system."

The reflooding so far is partly the work of the CPA, partly action by villagers, and helped, Jepsen said, by higher than usual volumes of water in the Tigris and Euphrates.

But life is hard, even for those who never left the marshes.

"We used to live on fish, melons and tomatoes before the water dried up," said Jita Abed Abdul-Aal, 37. "Now the water is salty and all I have is my military pension." He pointed to a tree in his courtyard where he said a shell fired by Republican Guards had exploded. He spent three years in jail after the local mayor denounced him as a rebel who had contacts with Iran. "It was true," he conceded.

Fresh water may again flow over the mudflats and brackish pools, but the clock cannot go back to the 1950s when British explorer Wilfred Thesiger eulogized a culture already under threat from modernity.

"People used to fish from their houses here," said Laith al-Amari, 33. "There was water all around." He sat in a *mudhif*, or guesthouse, of the kind described in Thesiger's *The Marsh Arabs* - a lofty barn made of reeds, bound into horseshoe arches to support poles overlaid by matting.

The *mudhif's* ceiling fans and electric lights are not the only reminders this is no longer Thesiger's watery idyll. Outside are cement houses in a dusty courtyard near an asphalt road. No water in sight.



Squandered paradise: A marsh Arab man watches water pour across a road to reflood land in Qurnah, Iraq: "We feel like we have lost our lives. If something is not done soon, we will die along with the marshes"

Camp Julien: a peacekeeper's paradise in Kabul

Canadian troops enjoy luxuries in middle of tense Afghan capital

Madeleine Coorey
Agence France Presse

KABUL: The sun is out and a couple wearing T-shirts and mirrored sunglasses play scrabble near the former king's ruined palace. In the nearby kitchens, cooks prepare meals for their guests while other residents play a game of hockey on a specially built mini-rink.

Welcome to Camp Julien, the base for some 1,700 Canadian peacekeepers charged with maintaining security in the tense Afghan capital, Kabul.

Forced to stay within the confines of the camp most of the time for security reasons, troops have been given what are considered the best Canadian tent quarters in the world. "Camp Julien probably has the best layout of any Canadian camp overseas," says spokesman Captain Richard Langlois. "So when you're inside it's like a home where you can rest and relax because as soon as you go outside that gate, the tension goes up a little bit."

More than 80 ISAF personnel

have been killed on active service since the multinational force was established under a UN mandate in December 2001 to maintain security in Kabul following the fall of the hard-line Taliban militia. While 54 of these deaths were in an aircraft crash, the latest killings were in suicide bombings targeting ISAF patrols in late January in which a Canadian and a British soldier lost their lives in separate attacks.

Some 6,000 ISAF soldiers are stationed in camps around the capital and living conditions vary from place to place. Other than daily patrols, Canadian soldiers are only allowed outings depending on the prevailing threat level.

Camp Julien, where accommodation is a tent shared with seven to 11 other soldiers, is stocked with amusements to remove any feelings of isolation. It has internet and games rooms, an office which helps soldiers organize their vacations and a well-equipped gym with machines imported from Canada.

The Canadian government spends some \$733,000 in sup-

plying about 1,400 soldiers with food each month. Most of the meat is imported from Canada and South America, with other items coming from North America and Europe.

Major Stephan Labelle has served in East Timor, Haiti, Bosnia, Italy and Kuwait and agrees that the Kabul base, close to the ruins of what was supposed to be the former king's palace, is the best he has experienced.

"This camp is the mother of all camps," he says. "It's a city within a city. It's not luxurious but it has access to everything we need."

While the food may not be "five-star" it beats having to prepare their own as many Canadian soldiers did in East Timor, he says.

Inside the Junior Ranks mess tent, the stereo is booming and off-duty soldiers play pool and table-hockey, or watch widescreen TVs. Residents are able to come here every night between 6pm and 10pm, when they have a two-drink limit.

Master Corporal Geff Ethier, says the camp is comfortable but that tents will get hot once summer begins. "But if we keep in mind that we are at the end of the world, I think it's good."

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A CONVERSATION WITH...

Riad Sattouf: Comics serve as perfect medium

26-year-old writer to release autobiographical bombshell: *My Circumcision*

Olivia Snaie
Special to The Daily Star

PARIS: France is paradise to the comic book lover. Close to 1,500 new BD books (BD stands for *bande dessinée*, or comic strips) are produced each year to satisfy the incessant appetite of mainstream and alternative audiences. Each year, the International Bande Dessinée Festival in Angoulême hosts up to 400,000 fans.

Accordingly, if you write and illustrate BDs, France is the place to be. Comics are considered an art form, and cartoonists are worshipped.

It's hard to know if Riad Sattouf would have written and illustrated comic books had he grown up somewhere else, but it's clear that this baby-faced 26-year-old has a lot to say, and comics are the perfect medium for him.

Sattouf burst into the world of BD's last year with the publication of the *Manuel du Puceau* (Handbook for a Virgin) for adolescents, and *Les Jolis Pieds de Florence* (Florence's Pretty Feet) which won the prestigious 2003 Rene Goscinny prize for best BD writer. His *Manuel du Puceau*, which does away with any notion of the politically correct, recounts the trials and tribulations of a pimply teenager with a raging libido. *Les Jolis Pieds de Florence* introduces the adult reader to Jeremie, a Franco-Libyan nerd who creates video games and is hopelessly in love with Florence, a co-worker in his office.

Nothing besides his name and a few vague allusions to the Arab world could prepare the reader for Sattouf's next book, which can be termed a tragicomic autobiographical bombshell. *Ma Circoncision* (My Circumcision) came out this year in a collection for teenagers but could very well be for adults. Funny and terrible, it is the grueling tale of an 8-year-old boy who lives in a Syrian village and is faced with his impending circumcision.

How much of *Ma Circoncision* is autobiographical? "One hundred percent," said Sattouf. The son of a French mother and Syrian father, Sattouf was born in Paris but lived until age 11 (except for two years in Libya) in Ter Maaleh, a small village near Homs, in Syria. (Sattouf describes Homs as resembling the spaceport city of Mos Eisley, in *Star Wars*.)

In *Ma Circoncision*, Sattouf recounts how one day his cousins notice that he isn't circumcised. He is immediately accused of being an Israeli, the worst insult the children can think of. Sattouf, who was blond as a child, lies in bed wondering if he is adopted. "Perhaps I really was Israeli?" "From the very first day my

difference was apparent. I was the only foreigner in the village... I went to the Muslim school and studied the Koran. We traveled to France sometimes so I knew there was another way of life. But the village was a place out of time, in a parallel dimension."

Sattouf, 8, lives in a fantasy world in which he and his cousins are Cimmerian warriors (they've seen a video of Arnold Schwarzenegger in *Conan the Barbarian* countless times). Corporal punishment at school is common and children are subjected to beatings on the soles of their feet. Their teacher, who looks like a "degenerate James Dean," rants to the children that "France and Europe are friends to the Israelis."

The classroom brutality and ignorance described by Sattouf is such, that the publisher's lawyer strongly recommended at the beginning of the book, a disclaimer which reads: "This book tells a true story, situated in a country in which the totalitarian regime formats children to a single mode of thought. It is against racism. It is not an incitement to racial hatred but bears witness to the way a society produces racial hatred."

Sattouf writes that his father decides his son should be circumcised. The next pages are a countdown until the unhappy event. The fateful day rolls around and the circumciser looks like Conan the Barbarian. "How many Syrians look like Arnold Schwarzenegger?" writes Sattouf.

"Only one, no doubt, and he was in my living room!" After a long and painful recovery, Sattouf finds out from his father that Israelis are circumcised as well.

Sattouf, who has not seen his father in 14 years, portrays him in *Ma Circoncision* as a harsh, unfeeling man. "Of course my father was more human than in the book. His moods alternated but there was a certain inflexibility about him, he never doubted his behavior."

His father was a university

professor with two doctorates from the Sorbonne. He was "very open-minded and totally emancipated. He never prayed, ate pork, but then his past caught up with him."

Sattouf's father became deeply religious after a stint of teaching in Saudi Arabia.

"I do have a kind of nostalgia for the village. There was little joy and people were very unhappy. They were conscious of living in misery. I can almost understand why at 50 my father went crazy. The weight of his family's history fell upon him and mowed him down."

Sattouf's French mother "didn't speak Arabic and couldn't stand life in the village anymore. She separated from my father and moved back to France."

Sattouf was catapulted from his village in Syria to the city of Rennes, in Brittany. Again, he was considered "different."

"In secondary school kids called me a dirty Arab. But somehow it didn't affect me as much as when I was called an Israeli in Syria. The biggest difference for me was being in school with girls! Later when I was in art school one of my teachers didn't like Arabs and said that work that wasn't done properly was called Arab work," Sattouf recalled.

As a child Sattouf drew constantly, and avidly read the BDs that his French grandmother sent him to Syria. He says he always knew that he wanted to draw. After art school in Nantes Sattouf attended the Gobelins School for animation in Paris and hasn't left the drawing board since. He began to illustrate BDs while still a student until he broke out on his own and created his character Jeremie, who is in large part autobiographical as well although "all my characters are me, even the girls. It's pretty personal."

Sattouf draws in an atelier that he shares with other well-known cartoonists. "It's stimulating to work together. We read each others' things and criticize them." Joann Sfar, one of France's star cartoonists, who illustrates

and writes mainstream and alternative BDs worked in the same atelier with Sattouf and encouraged him to write *Ma Circoncision*, among other books.

"I'd tell him stuff about my childhood and he couldn't believe it. I realized most people hadn't lived what I had lived. I decided to rid myself of this stuff and make some money, too!"

Sfar now directs a collection at Editions Breal, which published both *Manuel du Puceau* and *Ma Circoncision*.

Prestigious BD company Dargaud published Sattouf's first book, *Les Jolis Pieds de Florence*, as well as his second "Jeremie" volume, *Le Pays de la Soif* (Sea, Sex and Sun) this year, which recounts Jeremie's disastrous summer holidays.

Sattouf's particular brand of self-mockery in his libidinous anti-hero, Jeremie, (who one French critic termed as having "pathetic grandeur") but also in his childhood character in *Ma Circoncision*, has allowed him to evacuate many of his painful childhood experiences. In Jeremie the zany humor keeps the BD reading light. In *Ma Circoncision*, although the same humor is present, there is an undertone of real seriousness. It has also brought Sattouf full face with his feelings of identity. He says he no longer speaks Arabic but that he still reads and writes it.

"I'd like to take up Arabic again to be closer to my past and come to terms with it. People just can't believe that I'm from Syria. But I think I'm much more of an Arab than a kid who is originally from the Maghreb."

On the path to stardom in the BD world, Sattouf is juggling several projects at once. He is working on a series of comics for children, more Jeremie adventures, and stories from his Syrian childhood, which he'll publish this time in books for adults. While he doesn't feel "particularly at home in France", it is without a doubt the place for Sattouf to be. No other country would have published a BD as brutally funny and scathingly critical as *Ma Circoncision*.

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Sattouf's autobiographical book is a hit

