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**THE CONFLICT IN IRAQ: New Refugees, and Urban Combat**


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**REFUGEES**

# Fallujans in Flight: Transit Camps Are Not Much Safer Than Siege They Left

By RICHARD A. OPPEL Jr.

HABBANIYA, Iraq, Nov. 17 — By American military count, about 2,000 people came Tuesday to a makeshift food distribution site outside a military base here.

Many were refugees from Falluja, now living in old military housing next to the base; others were long-time residents. They approached the Iraqi soldiers managing the distribution cautiously. Snipers stood ready; crowds in Iraq can become targets.

But soon the people — men in long pants and short sleeves, old women in black abayas, restless children — formed lines to walk into the circle of concertina wire, to somehow haul off 110-pound bags of Indian black tea, sugar and rice, big cans of vegetable shortening, boxes of milk powder, and boxes of halal packaged food that the marines called “happy meals.”

Eventually, the lines grew chaotic, and American soldiers began helping to keep order.

“It’s very hard to get even a cigarette” at the refugee camp, said Taha Athir Sadham, who said he left Falluja for the camp one month ago and received a bag of food on Tuesday. He was not eager to go home. “I’m scared the insurgents will return again,” he says.

The housing next to the military base here was once home to British and later Iraqi civilians and officers, perhaps a few thousand people. But the influx from Falluja, 12 miles to the east, has more than doubled the population over the past few months.

The new residents have found novel ways of coping. They have punched holes in water mains to siphon off a dwindling supply, said Chief Warrant Officer Jean Poitevien, a Marine reservist. His unit, the Fourth Civil Affairs Group, is trying to bring supplies of water, power and other essentials to the camp.

The camp’s power generators are in the hands of men who sell residents enough electricity to power one or two appliances for a few hours; the price is 3,000 dinars, or about \$2, a lot of money for people who, if they have good jobs, might make \$5 a day, Mr. Poitevien said. A bottle of water can also sell for \$2.

It is hardly a safe place. Snipers are active in the camp, and insurgents have threatened school teachers who accept supplies from American forces. A reporter and photographer were allowed to watch the food

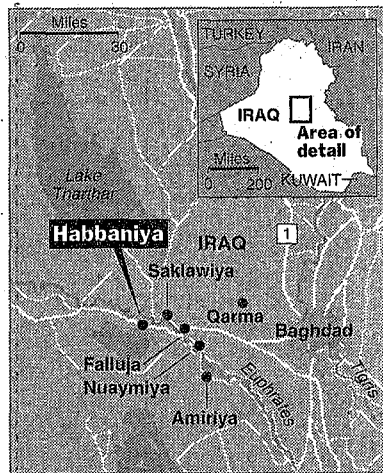
distribution and to speak with people in line, but not to visit the camp itself.

Still, this crowded, troubled spot offers a hint at what life is like some of the 200,000 Fallujans — of a population believed to approach 300,000 — who relief agencies say fled in the weeks before the Nov. 7 invasion by American and Iraqi troops.

Drawing on tribal and family ties that run deep, most of the refugees found shelter in the homes and gardens of relatives and friends across central Iraq, according to refugee workers and American military officials. Some 100,000 went to Amiriya, 12 miles south on the Euphrates River, according to the office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. Baghdad shelters about 30,000 Fallujans. A handful of cities now are home to 10,000 to 20,000 Fallujans apiece, including Habbaniya, Saklawiya, Nuaymiya and Qarma, according to the commissioner.

Some migrated to camps to the south and west of Falluja, dodging the con men promising a place to live for exorbitant prices, to scrape for food and water and electricity among old military buildings and abandoned structures.

“Families are living in three kinds



The New York Times

Residents of Falluja have fled to Habbaniya and other towns.



An Iraqi woman near a camp west of Falluja with a box of American military rations prepared under Koranic food laws.

Photographs by Shawn Baldwin for The New York Times

Iraqis on the food lines worried that snipers might attack them.

of places — camps, abandoned homes and schools, and with host families,” Rana Sidani, an official with the International Committee of the Red Cross, said Wednesday in a telephone interview from Geneva.

Many did not leave until the week or two preceding the attack, but many others left months ago, anticipating the looming battle and eager to leave behind the extremist rule of the insurgent militia and nighttime American bombing raids.

One man in the food line here, Muhammad Hattam, said he left in August. Even then, he recalled, roaming bands of insurgents were speeding through town, their faces covered, toting rocket-propelled-grenade launchers and semi-automatic rifles, he recalled. “It was miserable,” he said. “There was no authority, not security, no police to complain to.”

The final straw came, he said, when they began using his neighborhood, Al Askary, as a base to fire mortars at American troops camped outside the city. “And then the Americans,” he said, “started firing back.”

For relief agencies, whose ability to gather information and distribute supplies has been limited, the major

concerns are whether refugees have adequate supplies of food, clean water, medicine and warm shelter.

Diarrhea and fever have been a crucial problem in some areas, including Habbaniya. The Iraqi Red Crescent has been distributing food

and blankets in several cities and has dispatched a water purification unit to Habbaniya, she added.

Limited supplies of medicine have recently arrived in Falluja, but public health remains a major concern for the unknown number of those

who stayed behind. It has been very difficult for relief agencies to get a picture of conditions there, Astrid Van Genderen Stort, a spokeswoman for the United Nations refugee agency, said Wednesday in a telephone interview from Amman, Jordan.

Many Fallujans last received food from the government rationing system on Oct. 23, she said. “Unless they’ve been back in Falluja, they haven’t been receiving any food distribution,” Ms. Stort said. At the camp here, surveys by American forces showed that about 30 percent of the Fallujans — mainly those who own land and homes or who still have significant family in the city — want to return, said Mr. Poitevien, the reservist with the Fourth Civil Affairs Group.

“When peace returns, I’ll return,” said Talha Jabbar, a retiree from Falluja who was interviewed as he tried unsuccessfully to snare a much sought-after bag of rice on Tuesday. “We just want things to get better so we have security and food,” he said, standing in front of the concertina wire as Iraqi troops and police officers took the food from American troops and handed it to the Iraqis shuffling past.



Nervous, hungry refugees joined squatters yesterday near a former military camp at Habbaniya on a sometimes unruly line to get food.



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