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DOCUMENTING BAATHIST ABUSES

A group that documents past misdeeds wants to expand work in Kurdish areas.

By Frman Abdulrahman in Sulaimaniyah

An Iraqi organisation dedicated to documenting atrocities committed by the Baathist regime is seeking to expand its work in Iraqi Kurdistan, a region which suffered greatly under former leader Saddam Hussein.

The Iraq Memory Foundation, based in Washington and Baghdad, has created a network to document the oral and written evidence relating to Saddam's system of repression and social control. Since its establishment in 2003, it has gathered more than 11 million pages of records, with the aim of recording Iraq's tortured past so that future generations can learn from history.

After a four-day conference in Sulaimaniyah on May 5-8, foundation members said they were considering opening an office in this Kurdish city.

The conference brought together 60 non-government organisations from all over Iraq, as well as experts from as far afield as Burma, Cambodia, Guatemala, the United States and Serbia, to discuss the importance of documenting memories of atrocities, as well as practical methodologies.

Hassan Munaimina, the foundation's director of documentation, said Saddam's 35-year rule was an "era of tyranny". He said one of the organisation's primary aims is to place its documents, art and literary works in a national museum.

The conference was held in Sulaimaniyah both because it is Iraq's safest province and because it suffered so much under the Baathist regime, said Munaimina. Hundreds of thousands of Kurds were murdered, displaced or went missing during Saddam's campaign against the Kurds.

"We document so that we can condemn past atrocities, and so that they won't happen again," said Vahal Abdulrahman, operations manager for the foundation.

The Iraqi non-government groups attending the conference agreed to create a network to improve communication between all the organizations that work to document crimes committed between 1968 and 2003, when the Baathist regime was ousted.

Saddam and seven of his former deputies are on trial for crimes against humanity for the 1982 killing of 148 men in the town of Dijail. Abdulrahman said the foundation provided some documents to the Iraqi special tribunal trying the case.

Documentation Center of Cambodia
Searching for the Truth ស្វែងរកការពិត ដើម្បីការចងចាំ និង យុត្តិធម៌
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Rizgar Amin, who formerly served as a judge in the trial, said such documentation could be admissible as evidence if its authenticity could be verified.

He praised the conference as "a bridge for Iraqi and international organisations to unite their capacities to document Iraq's tragedies".

Many of the participants from across Iraq were human rights activists or victims of the former regime. Some made the point that there is no universal consensus that the Baath era was so bad.

"Unfortunately, some Iraqis and foreigners don't believe Saddam Hussein was cruel," said Karima Hassen, one of the participants.

On April 28, Saddam's 69th birthday, some residents of Baghdad's Azamiyah neighbourhood reportedly gathered to celebrate the event and kissed posters of the former dictator.

"Some people want the Iraqi regime to return [to power] because of the crises that Iraq is going through," said Mahdi al-Tamimi, secretary-general of the Baghdad-based Iraqi Political Prisoners' Association.

Tamimi said the point of documenting Saddam's era is to ensure it is not repeated.

"We want our children to grow up with love and tolerance," he said.

Frman Abdulrahman is an IWPR trainee journalist in Sulaimaniyah. Iraqi Crisis Report's Arabic editor Ferhad Murasil contributed to this report.

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