

Iraqi women offer thanks, praise

U.S. Rep. Ginny Brown-Waite invited the women to the county after hearing their stories in Washington.

By BETH N. GRAY, Times Staff Writer
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BROOKSVILLE - Life under Saddam Hussein was one of constant fear, two Iraqi women told a crowd of some 70 people gathered Wednesday afternoon at the Florida Army National Guard Aviation Facility.

During Hussein's reign, life also was fraught with danger as fathers and brothers disappeared in the middle of the night, never to be heard from again.

Children were roped together with women, then burned alive and buried in mass graves. Chemical gas was used in the killing of some 5,000 Kurds in the early '90s.

"He used it on us," said a teary-eyed Surood Ahmed Falih, a Kurd from Kirkuk, pressing her palms to her breast for emphasis. She is baffled that many Americans don't believe Iraq had chemical weapons.

That was part of the reason why U.S. Rep. Ginny Brown-Waite, R-Crystal River, said she was prompted to bring the Iraqi women to Hernando County. She recently heard their stories in Washington, D.C., and felt Iraq's reaction to the efforts of American troops and first-person accounts of Iraqis weren't being adequately reported by the media.

"In the media, it's always the worst case scenario; the Iraqis don't want us there," said Brown-Waite who visited Iraq last November. "Believe me, that's not the case."

She hoped that the stories shared by Falih and Taghreed Al-Qaraghuli helped her constituents get a fuller picture than the images of car bombings and skirmishes between insurgents and American troops.

"Unfortunately, bad news sells," Brown-Waite said, referring to what she called a "media bias."

Falih and her family fled with some 1,000 others from Kirkuk following a 1991 uprising. Many didn't make it. The family car evaded a helicopter but was soon ambushed at a roadblock. Her sister, aunt and stepmother were killed. When they found her grandmother, she was "burned, like pieces of meat," Falih said.

Falih was shot twice, she said, her father three times. Both survived, along with her younger brother. They hid in another city for 11 years.

"We were afraid all the time," said the 33-year-old, who is a Mosul University graduate.

"Our life, it was unbearable," she said as she clutched a tissue. "Life was miserable."

Al-Qaraghuli, 30, was equally taken aback that many Americans opposed the invasion of Iraq.

"They talk about a jihad but no one said about the millions Saddam killed," the Baghdad native said.

"We named this war as a liberation," Al-Qaraghuli said. "But the American people named it an invasion. It was the greatest invasion ever."

For 30 years, Iraqi citizens not members of the Baath political party "couldn't get anything," Al-Qaraghuli said. Children had to leave school to help relieve poverty, a result of Hussein's grip on a economy in which only the Baathists and the dictator's supporters prospered.

"A law would be made one night, another in the morning," Al-Qaraghuli said. "Saddam would make the laws. We had to be on our toes all the time."

When her father refused to join the Iraqi army to fight in the Iran-Iraqi war, the family was forced into hiding for two years.

"We lived under fear for our father's life, my brother's life," she said. "My father cried a lot."

When Al-Qaraghuli emerged from an underground after paying "an official bribe," she was denied admission into a master's degree program because she was not a Baath party member and her father had not served in the Iraqi army. She was denied a passport for the same reasons.

Both women said this was their first trip out of Iraq.

They came to the United States to give their thanks.

"When we heard American troops were coming . . . it was like angels coming from the heavens," Falih said.

The U.S. invasion and the collapse of the regime directly affected her life as a Kurd.

"This is the first time I am able to say, not afraid, that I am a Kurd," she said. "This is the first time I can sleep feeling safe."

In an aside that brought chuckles from the audience, she added, "My father, I think he's becoming younger now."

He is now working with the fledgling provincial government in Kirkuk.

"We're learning about democracy," Falih said with enthusiasm. "Democracy is a new word for us."

She is enthralled with the idea that all people are created equal. "We want to build that in our house."

The women lauded a new freedom of expression in their homeland and the proliferation of "hundreds" of newspapers in place of only two previously, both controlled by the Hussein regime.

Women have gained status in Iraq. Al-Qaraghuli, now administrative director of the Iraqi Independent Democrats and typist of the new constitution, said 25 percent of the new parliament is women.

Under Hussein, women were severely limited in career pursuits and even social scenes. They were not accepted in government posts. Al-Qaraghuli also is an active member of the Iraqi Independent Women's Group, a political party formed after the invasion to promote equal rights.

In a thank-you message to "American soldiers, their mothers, their families," Falih said, "Our life now improveth, more happiness and more safer."

Marie Williams of Inverness listened intently and was impressed with what she heard.

"I'd like to hear the other side of the story. So many are against the war in Iraq. I'm not one of them," Williams said. "The media doesn't tell you all that good stuff that's happening, just the bad."

Also on hand was Laura Freeman of Spring Hill, who brought her 3-year-old daughter, Carson. Her husband, chief warrant officer Ray Freeman, 34, has been on assignment in Iraq for 7 1/2 months as a Black Hawk helicopter pilot with his Brooksville-based National Guard unit.

Freeman came "just to maybe let it hit home a little bit more."

Laura Freeman said her husband "says if we would see what he sees every day, we'd all agree we should be there."