

courage

A courageous quest for independence; a childhood snuffed out in the barren desert

©UNHCR/VA Van Genderen Stort



Grieving parents at Massoud's funeral.

One morning, waking up as usual in their refugee camp in the no man's land between Iraq and Jordan, twelve-year-old Massoud told his mother he wanted a soda. "We have no money, my son," she reminded him. "We can hardly survive, so there is no money for extras like that."

An Iranian Kurd, Massoud had been living since the summer of 2003 in what was supposed to be a temporary camp in the desert along the main highway leading from Jordan into Iraq. His family had left Iraq after the bombings in March/April 2003 in the hopes of finding a place where they could live in peace and freedom. This camp was as far as they had reached in realizing that hope.

Prior to their present stateless existence, they had

lived for more than 20 years in the Al-Tash refugee camp, west of Baghdad, where they had sought refuge in the aftermath of the Islamic revolution in 1979. Other Iranian families of Kurdish origin had joined them at the beginning of the Iran-Iraq war in 1980. By early 2003, over 12,000 Iranians of Kurdish origin were living in the camp.

Hoping to escape the war, about 1,200 refugees left Al-Tash camp in search of another home outside Iraq, while some 1,600 made their own way to the northern governorates, primarily to Sulaymaniyah. Still others repatriated spontaneously to Iran.

But Massoud's family was more adventurous, and courageously decided to seek a completely new life, well away from Iran, Iraq and the camp. The family went to Jordan, hoping to be allowed into that, or any other country, in or outside the region. Little did they know that their odyssey would end up once more in a camp, this time in a no-man's land, right in the middle of nowhere.

A number of agencies, including UNHCR, CARE, the Hashemite Jordanian Charity organization have been working hard since the fall of the Saddam regime to assist the more than 1,500 Iranians, Iranian Kurds, Palestinians, Sudanese and Somalis stranded in this no-man's land, and in the Ruweished camp just inside Jordan. Working very closely with the Jordanian government, UNHCR has been trying to find solutions for the Iranian Kurd and Palestinian refugees, and in 2003 Jordan accepted 386 Palestinians with Jordanian spouses. The remaining Palestinians have said they want to go to their homes in the West Bank and Gaza, and even to Israel.

This has not been possible so far, and since May 2004 many have decided to return to Baghdad – a courageous decision for those who had left, "never to return". But anything was better than suspended, cut off and suffering from the harsh conditions.

Meanwhile, for those who stayed in the camp, life continued to be extremely stressful. Living on top of each other and still trying to maintain the basic standards of life, they were constantly exposed to freezing desert winds, scorching heat and the threat of wild animals. No wonder young Massoud longed for such a simple luxury: "Today I will make sure I earn some money, so I can buy a soda for myself and something for my family," he told his mother.

Massoud had finally gathered enough courage to shake off the invisible chain that the camp life and poverty had wrapped around him, at least for a while. Taking his fate in his own hands he went out of the gate where his camp-mates gathered daily to watch the "real world" go by, onto the main highway, where hundreds of massive trucks and cars pass every day between Iraq and Jordan. He was going to sell some of the goods that were handed out for free by the aid agencies. He was going to do business. Make a profit. Get something he really wanted. And no-one was going to stop him.

"We were not around when he went out," his mother said later. "He would never ever go out of the gate, but that day he did. They told us he was playing with other kids and every time a car passed by, he would show them his goods."

A huge truck hit Massoud on the main highway. He was killed instantly.

Bone-chilling wails filled the cemetery of Ruweished town: Massoud's father crying for the son he could not bring back. His mother, stunned, silent with grief. The burial of a 12-year-old who never chose Ruweished to be his final home. A boy who just wanted a cool drink in the harsh desert ... who set out on his own journey, to get a soda.

But that soda represented more than a simple soft drink. It was a dream, an attempt to gain a little independence and normality in a place where both are hard to find.

"Massoud should never have died," said his mother later, still grieving, "but something in me is so proud of him, of a son who never gave up doing what he really wanted. He had courage where we were already numbed by circumstances. With his death he taught us to live and treasure life even more, even under the harshest circumstances."

courage