

FILM-IRAQ:

A Glimpse of Life Under Occupation

Aaron Glantz*

SAN FRANCISCO, California, Nov 15 (IPS) - The most honoured film about the Iraq war is opening at theaters across the United States this month.

The documentary "Iraq in Fragments" by independent film-maker James Longley won best director, cinematography and editing when it opened at the prestigious Sundance Film Festival earlier this year. Since then, it has won awards at festivals in Chicago, Cleveland, Thessalonica, and at the Human Rights Watch film festival in New York.

What sets "Iraq in Fragments" apart from the mass of other journalism on Iraq is that it does not confront the issue of the war directly. U.S. soldiers are on the periphery of the film, as are Iraqi politicians, Ba'athist insurgents and al Qaeda terrorists.

Instead, viewers are treated to a view inside Iraqi culture and daily life under occupation. It is cinematographically beautiful, taking viewers into places as diverse as schools, barber shops, auto shops, mosques, markets and train stations.

In production notes to the film, Longley writes about entering Iraq shortly after the fall of Saddam Hussein in 2003.

"I could film whatever I wanted as long as I could stay alive," he writes, with no government minders or stringent visa requirements. "My guess was that I would have about a year before either a new authoritarian government would be put in power or Iraq would descend into civil war and become too dangerous to work in. I needed to make my film while it was still possible."

A full disclosure is in order. This reporter lived with Longley in Iraq for months at a time during his two years of filming, and sometimes wondered what kind of film he would come up with. Day after day, your reporter went after the breaking news and Longley would trundle off to film the same people: a child labourer on Baghdad's auto row, a leader of one of the Shi'ite Sadr movement in Southern Iraq, and a small farming family in Iraqi Kurdistan.

That's not to say the film doesn't have implications for U.S. policy in Iraq -- especially in its intimate portrayal of the movement of Shi'ite cleric Muqtada al-Sadr, which has battled with the U.S. military on and off for the last two years.

Like President George W. Bush, the new speaker-designate of the U.S. House of Representatives, Democrat Nancy Pelosi, has made "disarming the militias" a major part of her Iraq policy.

"The militias exist in Iraq because of a power vacuum because there is no effective central government," Longley told IPS. "There is no effective central government because the United States presence in the country is splitting the country politically and there is no way to form a national government while the United States is there."

In his film, Longley focuses in on the Sadr movement in the southern Iraqi city of Nasseriya, and in particular the local leader Sheik Aws al-Kafaji.

"They would suck away our wealth and control our minds and after that they accuse us of being terrorists. Where is the money they are squandering? And where are the food supplies?" the sheik preaches to a massive outdoor congregation.

"They blame the security situation! But by God you see all these trucks coming from everywhere all carrying supplies for the Americans carrying weapons for the security forces... What a shame that some still believe the occupying power has Iraqi interests at heart."

Like the rest of "Iraq in Fragments", Longley's portrayal of the Sadr movement is intimate and fair. When the U.S. military appoints a local government, Sheik Aws tries to organise representative elections to promote democracy and self-determination. He also sends out patrols of his Mehdi militia to beat up local businesspeople for allegedly selling alcohol, and brings them back to the Sadr office.

"Saddam uprooted my family -- now I'm alone! How can I be bound again? Even God cannot accept it," one of the Sadr movement's prisoners says blindfolded.

A woman in a black abaya waits outside for her husband. "I just want to visit with him a little," she pleads with a guard. "You're framing people."

"We're living through challenging times in this city," Sheik Aws concedes later. "Either we will live or die. We want to close every door of depravity opened by America. And we are sure that America is preparing our punishment."

The film's final chapter is set in Kurdish Northern Iraq, far away from the violence that characterises much of the occupation. Children go to school without much difficulty, even if they still live with little electricity.

There, the smoke rising like a pillar in the air comes not from war, but through the burning of agricultural waste.

"It is written in Qu'ran that if we stay alive we will see any place touched by sunlight will be governed by Islam," says an elderly farmer in Kureton outside Arbil. He hopes that as with the Jews and Israel, the Kurds will eventually have an independent state of their own.

"They say that the Kurds are blasphemers," he says. "That they brought the Americans to Iraq. But if there is religion left it is among the Kurds."

"Iraq in Fragments" is a film that could not be made today. The security situation throughout the country has deteriorated to such an extent that it is no longer possible to follow regular people with a camera in tow. Virtually every foreign journalist in Iraq left in Iraq is embedded with the U.S. military.

The glimpse of Iraq you see in Longley's film is not one you'll see on the nightly news, which is what makes it so important.

(*IPS correspondent Aaron Glantz is author of the book "How America Lost Iraq".)

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