

Report from Suleimaniya

26 February 2011

A Confusing Day

February 26 has been a confusing day to say the least. Perhaps the events of the day, hazy as they appear, are an indication that the Barzani government is fighting back.

Early in the morning we left for Halabja. This is a city near the Iranian border that is infamous as the place where 5000 Kurds died from a gas attack from Saddam Hussein. We went there to find out about the condition of prisoners that had been taken a few days earlier. The day started out weirdly when we got a free government car, compliments of an alcoholic actor that we had stood with as part of the white group. I am always wary that free things have a hidden price but we had little choice but to accept the ride. When we arrived in Halabja we first met a human rights worker for the city who took us to an independent radio station where we learned that all the prisoners had been released. From there we were taken to meet the mayor and the chief of police who told us that on the day of the arrests the demonstrations in Halabja that one policeman had been killed and several injured by stones and gun fire. This part of the story we already knew and believe to be true. We also believe that the police showed remarkable restraint during that demonstration resulting in no serious injuries to demonstrators. We were told that a few young men, mostly under 18, some from the city, some from other places came wearing masks and carrying guns, but not AK47's. It was one of this group that had shot the policeman in the head. So far this is fairly believable but then we were told that all of these young men had been released back to their families by a local judge and told not to cause any more trouble, this after having shot a policeman dead. From there we went to the police station where we saw the empty holding cell, met an injured policeman and Michele met some of the riot police on the parade square. Marius and I were able to stay back from that. All of this was done in front of a lot of cameras. In the end it seems fairly certain that more than 15 were arrested, perhaps up to 50, but that all had been released.

From there we went back to the radio station where Michele was interviewed, and did a good job of explaining our work here, how we support people who are working peacefully to improve the democratic process. Following that we were asked to meet briefly with the parents of the dead policeman.

While we were in Halabja we received an urgent phone call from a contact in Sulemaniya informing us that four of the leaders of the protests had been kidnapped, phones disabled so no one knows where they are. One of these people is a member of the communist party but we do not know who any of the others are. We asked ourselves whether the protests would continue without four of its leaders.

When we arrived back in Sulemaniya Michele and Marius went back to the demonstration but I went back to the house to prepare supper because we have decided that the person cooking supper should stay home each day. This was my day to cook.

I had not been home very long before I had a call from Marius saying they were on their way home. The protest had attracted the usual sized crowd of several thousand. Suddenly some sort of noise making bomb went off behind the stage sending people fleeing, fearing some sort of car bomb. For the first time during these demonstrations there was real fear and people started running so the white group could not totally contain them. Still many demonstrators as well as the militia behind were able to settle the crowd down without any injuries. Then a little later shots were fired, perhaps from a hand gun followed by machine gun fire, perhaps into the air. It is not at all clear who shot or from where. A local hospital employee has twittered that he saw two dead people in the hospital. We will be assessing the situation before returning to the demonstrations.

To add a final note to the confusion in Halabja we learned of a video that is circulating about the protest there when the policeman was killed. Apparently it shows that the policeman who was shot was off duty and simply part of the protest and that the 15 arrested people were the ones who carried his body off the street. It also shows that he could easily have been shot by an on duty policeman.

In spite of all of this you need to know that the city of Sulemaniya remains very calm. We are far from the square in the center of the city where the demonstrations are taking place and they have quite definite start and end times, usually one thirty until five except for the one on Friday which lasted eight hours.

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