

Protests at Azadi Square, March 13, 2011

I have just sent a message on the present situation. People are pleading with us to get this story out to international media so spread this as widely as you can. See the last paragraph for the Canadian involvement.

The central square in Sulemaniya is officially known as Bar Darki Sara but the protesters here have renamed it Azadi Square, Azadi meaning freedom in Kurdish. Very quickly after the initial protests against the dictatorial government erupted in violence on February 17 a steering committee was formed to give a voice to the people without giving the police and military groups any reason to attack the demonstrators. This steering committee calls itself the Azadi Square Interim Council, (ASIC). This group had grown to about 55 people. Two of the leaders of this group are Nasiq Qadir, a sociologist and political researcher, and her husband Farouq Rafiq, a philosopher and intellectual. Both of these people are Kurdish born people who have lived, worked and studied in Canada, and have Canadian citizenship. >From the formation of ASIC the aim of the group has been to keep the protests peaceful, and to give all people an opportunity to say publically what they think about the political situation here. The presence of this open microphone in Azadi Square is an open door on freedom that the Kurdish people have never before seen. This decision to have this open microphone is extremely dangerous. Some people call for overthrow of the present government. This is the same government that can arrest, kidnap, disappear and torture opponents at will, given the close ties between the judiciary and the parties. Others are asking for handouts that no government could possibly agree to provide. Some people are calling for reform of the present political systems and improved services for the people. The ASIC has issued a list of 37 demands, which have at this time not been met. These demands relate to reforms to the political system and better living conditions for the Kurdish people. No support for any of the opposition parties has been offered because members of the ASIC believe that all political parties will have political agendas that are not the will of the people. The ASIC has called for a general strike but this has not received strong support. At the moment new developments seem to be on the horizon. Jalal Talabani, the President of Iraq, a Kurd and leader of the PUK party, one of the two ruling parties of the Kurdish Region is here in Sulemaniya. He has Peshmerga soldiers loyal to him on high alert, and there is pressure to put an end to this protest with violent force. At the same time the protesters are becoming more impatient and angry. One organizer suggested that there was a plan to take the square by force this evening but a last minute meeting between Talabani and US vice president Joe Biden gave a reason to hold back to learn what that might have accomplished. Some of the protesters are even suggesting that ASIC leaders are dupes of the government, keeping them confined to Azadi Square where they cannot do anything beyond talk. On most days one talks with university students who are angry with their schools being closed. At this same time we are coming up to the 22nd anniversary of the gas attack on Halabja by Saddam Hussein on March 16. The ASIC leaders are promising an increased pressure on the government for reforms on that day. There is not much to indicate what this increased pressure might be. One suggestion has been to take this protest to the regional government seat in Erbil. This would likely lead to violent clashes because the other half of the coalition government, the KDP, led by Masoud

Barzani has its main power base in the other two governorates of Erbil and Dohuk. The KDP forces have managed to quell even outbreaks of dissent there. The next few days could be very tense, and might well give some clear indications of eventual outcomes in this struggle for reformation of this oppressive and corrupt regime. In the meantime the ASIC leaders are watching their backs. ASIC leaders are being threatened with arrests, kidnappings and death. The threats come from unknown sources that likely are secret service people for the governing parties. The ASIC leaders sleep in different safe houses every night. Trusted volunteers surround these leaders in an attempt to keep them safe. They are taking considerable risks with their very lives. Most of the local Kurdish TV stations are party owned and in recent days the rhetoric coming from all of them has become increasingly violent, given to personal attacks and accusations that do nothing to address the issues being raised by the people. This sort of TV coverage could easily incite people to violence. I am very aware that two of outspoken ASIC leaders are Canadian citizens. Farouq Rafiq has been threatened publically. At the very least I think the Canadian Government has an obligation to ask the Kurdish Regional Government to allow peaceful protests in all areas of the region. The Canadian Government definitely has a reason to be interested in the KRG because Canadian oil companies such as Heritage Oil, Addax Petroleum and others are very active here.