This story was one of several filed from the mountains straddling Turkey and Iraq in the spring of 1991, when the Kurds of northern Iraq fled their homes to find refuge from Saddam Hussein's advancing army in the wake of the first Persian Gulf War. Reporter Jacqui Banaszynski and photographer John Doman of the *St. Paul (Minn.) Pioneer Press* spent three weeks in the region, sometimes driving seven hours to reach camps in the mountains, then filing photographs and stories overnight from makeshift bathroom darkrooms and on unreliable phone lines. They were among the first journalists to enter northern Iraq as NATO forces secured a safety zone and Kurds became to return home to reclaim destroyed and abandoned villages.

The Littlest Refugees

Kurdish children find their own joy

Amid squalid camp's death and despair

By Jacqui Banaszynski, *St. Paul Pioneer Press*

April 28, 1991

ISIKVEREN, TURKEY – To have your heart broken, it is not necessary to visit the children's hospital at the refugee camp called Isikveren.

It is enough to walk up the mountain and to look at all those small, watchful faces. It is enough even to look beyond the ones who are quiet, who stare but don't speak, and only count the ones who holler at your unguarded heart.

"Hullo! Hullo! What is your name?"

The answer doesn't matter. Only that you give one, and that you return their eager waves, for as long as they wiggle and grin, until you are up the hill and around the corner and facing a new sea of tiny greeters.

The census takers, such as they are, say 60 percent of the 2 million Kurds who fled Saddam Hussein's napalm and gas and Scud missiles are children.

Doctors who work in the crude tent hospitals, spitting their salvation at an ocean of sickness, say 90 percent of the children have dangerous diarrhea. Sixty percent of those under 3 are dehydrated. Pneumonia is taking root. Meningitis threatens.

The gravediggers, who daily attack the root-clotted, rocky mountainside to create sudden cemeteries, say 80 percent of the 20 people they bury each day are children who could not yet walk.

These are the lost children of Kurdistan, an ethnic population of 17 million to 27 million who have a tumultuous past, no permanent home and an uncertain future.

Ancient history records them as nomads, their Indo-European blood linking them to the Persians, Armenians and Iranians. Modern history places them in the mountains straddling the borders of Turkey, Iraq, Iran, Syria and the Soviet Union, and fighting endless rebellions against their host governments and among themselves.

Through it all, they have always been denied a homeland.

Current events find more than 2 million of them as refugees, squatted in the hostile mountains of Turkey and Iran after fleeing the wrath of Saddam's Iraqi army.

But as you climb those same mountains, numbers and history seem to matter little. More important is the girl there with a ballet of dark freckles dancing beneath her black eyes, a 5-gallon water jug perched expertly on her narrow shoulder. Or the toddler without pants who, despite his parents' shyness, steps forward and screams, "Bye-bye! Bye-bye!" And there are the twins, boy and girl, who save part of that night's leafy greens and begin to plant their own salad garden, seemingly confident it will grow them a forest of meals.

For a moment, as you watch them, you forget to fear for them. You squint against the harsh mountain sun and see the world through the prism of their childhoods. The squalid camp at Isikveren, where 50,000 of them live on faith and supplies dropped from the air, becomes a wonderland for their unfettered imaginations.

The first toy to be built was a swing. Brazen boys hoarded the tent ropes left behind by a family that had moved on – farther into the flatlands of Turkey in hopes of better food, or back to Iraq to take their chances – and found a high, sturdy branch from which to swing.

Others charmed rubber gloves from the nurses. Several strong puffs later, they had made funny, nippled balloons to waggle at the babies or blurt rudely at each other.

The mountain is filled with trees for climbing and, when the boys take once-forbidden machetes into the branches with them, gathering firewood becomes more adventure than chore.

The rains that eroded the bare mountain slopes left long, steep, sandy ruts for sliding. Sit on a torn cardboard box that once held blankets, or a flattened plastic water bottle, and you scoot all the faster.

Every day is a scavenger hunt, with thousands of lost shoes, blue jeans or other abandoned clothes for the searching. Pockets sometimes yield coins or worry beads.

And every day brings a parade, a never-ending wheeled march of ambulances and military vehicles and supply trucks. The braver boys hang onto the backs of the trucks to be dragged along, their sandaled feet as agile as any skateboarder's, or stand on top for potato fights with their buddies. A favorite game among the younger ones is to squat on the edge of the road and toss water bottles under passing wheels, watching them explode or flatten. It's like putting pennies on a train track.

Every night sparkles with campfires, and children are warmed further by the nearness of parents and siblings and cousins and friends, with no one to make them take a bath or get up early for school.

If you watch them play long enough, listen only to their laughing, perhaps you can forget, like the younger ones already have, that a week ago their bellies held no food and their bodies shivered at night under spring sleet storms.

But, if you want to forget, avoid the blank stares of their parents, the too-old faces of the children, whose lithe bodies already are curving into the pronounced "S" that comes from

balancing water jugs on their shoulders day after day. Block out the angry questions of the fathers, who have their own question in English: "Why?"

Face those stares and the honesty of those questions, and you are forced to open your eyes and see the future and to wonder about the children.

"It leaves traces on a generation. It has to," said Lieseth VanMilgen, a Dutch psychologist and translator with the organization Doctors Without Borders. "But how deep the scars depends on how long it lasts.

"In wartime, people have no time to be mentally ill. They commit themselves fully to getting food and water, to getting their basic survival needs met everyday. Only when it is over do they have time to think about what happened to them. Only then do they maybe become neurotic.

"For now, many of the children seem very happy. They're playing; their families are together. Maybe they will forget."

Alex Winkler is chief of operations for the medical team here. He witnessed similar devastation and displacement in Afghanistan. But in both places, he was impressed by the physical and mental resiliency of the mountain people.

"These people are tough," Winkler said. "Kurdish people have been the victims of a lot of oppression. This is not a struggle of yesterday. They can take a lot."

And so you believe. Until you visit the children's hospital. There, in the back room of the walled tent, Dutch nurse Willibrord Goverde makes the rounds of his seven tiny patients.

Jamaa Jafar is 4 months old, but weighs less than 7 pounds. A white hat covers his tiny head to keep his dehydrated body warm. The baby has an infected mouth from sucking on dirty rubber nipples, so his mouth is too sore to suck. Goverde shows the mother how to drip milk into the baby's mouth with a syringe. The baby glances quickly from Goverde to his mother, following noises with his eyes. It is a good sign.

Shimal Ammen is not so alert. At 18 months, he weighs 14 pounds and can no longer sit up. He has pneumonia and is dehydrated. Goverde tells the mother not to feed the boy, to let the fluids drip into him intravenously. But she sees that her baby is so thin and, as soon as the nurse leaves the room, slips him bits of bread.

And so it goes. Hoyer Anwar, 1, so dehydrated he has no thigh muscles left to take the antibiotic Goverde wants to inject, so weak he barely mews when the needle finally finds a home. Navin

Ahmad, a girl, 10 months, who also has a mouth too infected to suck, whose mother is barely 16. Shevan Fazel, 2, who lays stiffly on his blanket pallet, wincing and whining whenever he moves his head to look at his mother. Goverde thinks he suffers from meningitis.

Dolman Ebrahim is Goverde's current favorite, perhaps because she shows some signs of life and so it is not so risky to care. Bright gold-and-red earrings look over-large on her wizened face. At 13 months, she weighs 12 pounds. But she sucks her mother's breast with renewed enthusiasm and rewards Goverde's whistling with a dimpled smile.

He faces the seventh pallet in silence. Nashan Gorges is 6 months old. He weighs 9 pounds. He has pneumonia, diarrhea and advanced malnutrition. When Goverde pinches the infant's shrunken stomach, the parchment skin stays wrinkled, failing to bounce back with healthy baby fat. He is bundled in blankets, socks and a cap, but even so his temperature stays 2 degrees below normal.

Goverde finishes his rounds and gets up abruptly. What are this baby's chances?

"None."

And, if your heart is not yet broken, Goverde pauses only briefly to glance at the eighth and last pallet on the plastic-covered

floor. Thirty minutes earlier it cradled a 3-month-old, Koran Skikoy. Now it is empty. The child's mother wrapped her dead son in a blanket and carried him to the graveyard just as Goverde was beginning his rounds. Her walk to the cemetery took her under that first swing built by other children only a week ago.

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