

Iraq psychiatric patients still suffer from looting

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Chicago Tribune (KRT)

BAGHDAD, Iraq — When looters sacked the Al Rashad Psychiatric Hospital, they stole drugs, medical equipment, air conditioners, kitchen supplies, food, fans, mattresses, even the toilets and sinks.

Then the thieves committed one last grievous act: They left the hospital gates open, allowing most of the terrified patients to flee.

Nearly two weeks after the looting spree, the hospital staff is trying to account for 800 missing patients, hoping that most made their way to family homes instead of being forced to fend for themselves on Baghdad's streets.

Nearly 300 patients stayed behind. They live in squalor, with no running water and electricity and diminishing supplies of psychiatric drugs that were recently retrieved from looters who left them at a nearby mosque.

On Sunday morning, the male patients stood behind a gate in a compound and received a breakfast of tea served from a bucket, bits of bread and a cigarette each. Most were barefoot and dressed in dirty nightgowns. Some wore dirty old sport coats over their gowns.

One man walked around naked. Flies swarmed everywhere. The smell of human waste filled the air.

"This was once one of the best hospitals in the Middle East," said Mohammed Abdul Sattar, the hospital's pharmacist. "Now, this is all we have left. We need everything. We need to fix the destruction. We need drugs. We need food. We need water."

Workers from the International Committee of the Red Cross arrived

last week to assess the damage. They brought in a generator and a small supply of bags of water.

But it could take many weeks, if not months, to restore the hospital and round up the missing patients.

Only a few of the hospital buildings are usable. The male patients are in a one-story ward; women are in another.

Many of the male patients do not have mattresses for their beds, lined eight to a room. They sleep on the floor or on the rusty springs. Others rest on concrete seats.

In the afternoon, many men sat looking at nothing. Others walked in a daze through an outdoor courtyard. Some helped ferry clothes in blankets to a washroom. Others washed the concrete floor.

In the women's ward, lunch was cooked in two large pots over a wood fire in a courtyard. The women sat on their haunches and used their hands to scoop boiled rice and sauce from bowls.

The looting occurred after April 8 when, according to the hospital staff, U.S. forces arrived at the site, gouging a hole through a wall. The soldiers apparently crossed the hospital grounds to get to a nearby Baath Party headquarters and juvenile prison. Iraqi soldiers were on duty at the hospital, but apparently fled, leaving their weapons.

Staff said some looters followed in the wake of U.S. troops while others entered the front gate.

"The American troops thought there was a prison underground," said Ahmed Abdul Karim, 53, a medical technician.

Karim said that the staff asked

the troops to stop the looting but that they refused.

"I blame the American troops," Karim said. "The troops that entered here had to take care of the hospital and not leave it for the thieves."

Staff members and some patients said they believed local people from around the area participated in the looting. It was unclear whether hundreds or more than 1,000 people were involved.

Hagop Ouzounian, an English-speaking patient who said he was educated in the United States, said thieves entered one of the wards, stole all the items and beat a staff member who resisted.

He said the patients were then let out.

During the looting, there were also four reported rapes, according to the hospital staff, one in the hospital and three outside after patients fled the grounds.

One victim was a frail woman named Aliaya, who wore a dirty turquoise gown and had dark circles beneath her eyes. She said she was 16 but appeared to be in her mid-40s.

Aliaya said three men assaulted her, including one who had a gun.

"He told me he would shoot me," she said.

Aliaya is back at the hospital, though there is little hospital left to help her.

"We can't explain the disaster that happened here," said Karim, the medical technician. "Everything is destroyed."

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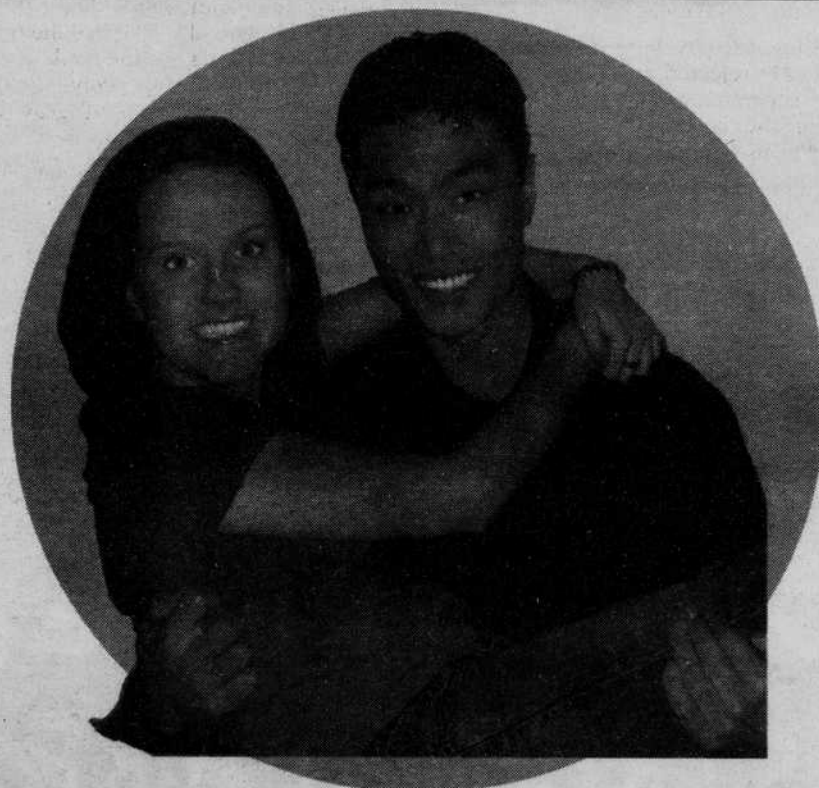
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