



Archbishop Tutu and members and supporters of KHRAG gather on the steps of St George's Cathedral in Cape Town to protest the attack on Kobane

IS factor an obstacle to Kurdish progress

2014 has been a very a traumatic period for the Kurdish people not only in Turkey but also in Syria and Iraq. During September of this year, the Islamic State (IS) group launched an attack on Kobane, a Kurdish enclave on the Syrian side of the Turkish border, with heavy artillery.

The attack had threatened the peace talks between the Turkish government and Abdullah Ocalan. The attack was repulsed by the heroic men and women of Kobane and the talks survived.

The year started off with relative peace and calm. The unilateral ceasefire announced by Abdullah Ocalan on 21 March 2013 had held. There were no serious incidents arising from the withdrawal of the Kurdish People's Party (PKK) armed combatants. At some stage, the withdrawal had stalled because the Turkish government had not met its obligations.

The peace process had three phases. The first phase was the declaration of the ceasefire and the withdrawal of the guerrillas from the Turkish territory. The second phase was the legal framework to legitimise the peace process. The third phase was

the normalisation of the political situation in the country.

In July 2014, the Turkish government had introduced legislation to parliament to deal with the second and third phases of the process. The legislation was adopted with a big majority.

Considerable optimism was generated which could only be shattered by right-wing forces opposed to a peace process.

However, during the latter part of this year, the crisis in Syria took a turn for the worst.

It spilled over to the Kurdish area of Iraq. IS, which were part of the allied opposition forces trying to dislodge the Assad regime from Syria, changed tactics and invaded Iraq. It created havoc in the area and killed innocent people including women and children. It displaced thousands of people who fled the area. They included Yazidis, Assyrians, Christians and Muslims.

IS returned to Syria with the heavy weaponry it had captured and launched an attack on Kobane.

Despite being outnumbered and outgunned, Kurdish defence units which included a women's battalion, repelled the attack.

The people of Kobane called for international

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Editorial

2014: TWO STEPS FORWARD, ONE STEP BACK

THE Kurds have suffered terrible repression and assimilation for almost 100 years.

In recent times, there has been some light at the end of the tunnel as the prospect for a negotiated peace seemed possible in Turkey.

However, developments in Syria, especially the emergence of the Islamic State (IS) group, have stalled the progress to self-determination for the Kurds.

KHRAG has condemned the wave of attacks on the Kurds and a range of other ethnic and religious groupings, including Sunni and Shia Muslims by IS.

The Kurds - in Syria and elsewhere in the Middle East - have suffered terrible injustices for almost 100 years - ever since Britain and France carved up Kurdistan and left the Kurds scattered in four different countries.

Since then, colonial and imperial missions together with autocratic rule have brought huge suffering to people in the region - especially the Kurds who today number 40 million.

The IS and Western Imperial powers have much to answer for as they battle to control valuable resources in the region.

Western 'foreign policy' has caused much death and destruction over decades and some of its allies in the Middle East are known to have provided direct support to these foreign mercenaries.

An impartial international force is required to bring stability to the region and create the climate where local populations are able to negotiate peace and assert their democratic rights to self-determination without interference by big powers

As 2015 beckons, we will redouble our efforts to bring about a just peace for the long-suffering Kurds throughout the Middle East.

► Behind the news stories of death, suffering and destruction

THERE ARE REAL PEOPLE LIVING HERE

WITHIN the last few months, the worldwide community has witnessed the atrocities committed by the Islamist fundamental group Islamic State (IS) within the Syrian and western and northern Iraqi borders. IS's goal is to create an Islamic caliphate that stretches from Syria to Iraq. Consequently, they have targeted various minority religious groups located in this area. Therefore, several religious and ethnic groups have been displaced, within own borders, but also across borders.

What has received less attention is the understanding of the various cultural and religious groups as well as the environment in which they inhabit. This edition of KHRAG News will look at the origin, languages and cultures of the peoples of this region.

One ethnic minority in Iraq are the Yazidis, numbering somewhat 700,000 worldwide. They are described as an ancient religious sect of Kurdish offspring, and have received much attention lately due to the persecution by IS. Their religion is considered a pre-Islamic sect, drawing from Christianity, Judaism and Zoroastrianism. They have been portrayed as "devil worshippers", by IS.

Christians are another large group located in Iraq and Syria. While you can find Christians in many neighbouring countries, we will only focus on the Christians in northern Iraq and large parts of Syria. Within the broad community of Christians, the Assyrians as an ethnic group are well known. Most of them are Chaldean Catholics, located in northern Iraq and eastern Syria, as well as Iran and Turkey.

The Assyrians are an indigenous people of Mesopotamia, with a history span of over 6700 years, claiming to be descendants of the ancient Assyrian empire which ended in 612 B.C. They are believed to be one of the earliest civilizations emerging in Mesopotamia. The Assyrians have since the 13th century mostly lived in the mountainous region of the Mesopotamian plain. This area was later divided amongst Iran, Iraq and Turkey. In contrast to the Syrians, the Assyrians are not Arabs, but have a separate identity, language (Syriac – the language spoken by Jesus Christ) and culture.

Another group of people found in the Iraq and Syrian region are the Turkmen. In Iraq, they are ancient inhabitants, comprising the third largest ethnic group after Arabs and Kurds. While estimates of their numbers vary, they comprise approximately 13 percent of the population, equal to between 1 to 3 million. They are descendants of waves of Turkic migration to Mesopotamia from the 7th century to the Ottoman rule.

Originally pastoral nomads, but with time and movement into the cities, this way of liv-



ing has been replaced by city life. In Syria, the first traces of Turks were found in the armies of the caliph of Damascus in year 698. Following on, Turkish tribes settled in various parts of today's Syria. Syria was first established by the Ottoman Sultan Yavuz Selim in 1916.

As with population estimations elsewhere, there are insufficient sources about Turkmen in Syria. In fact, the population size of Turkmen has never officially been estimated by the authorities. Estimates vary between 100,000 and 250,000 Turkmen in Syria.

They are scattered across the country, but mainly located in the Damascus and Aleppo regions, and the nearby surroundings. The Senior Regional Analyst David Nissman reports that the Turks in Iraq and Syria dates their history back to approximately the same time, and they have also been subject to the same assimilation policies and pressures from their governments.

As far as the Jews are concerned, the Jews in Iraq were relocated from Israel to Iraq around 700BC by the Assyrians who won against the northern tribes of Israel. Later, in 586 BC, Jews were taken as slaves by the Babylonians when they conquered the southern tribes of Israel. The Jews are believed to be one of the longest surviving Jewish

communities that still live in Iraq. While they accounted for one third of Baghdad's population by World War I, by 2008 there were less than 10 Jews left, with only one functioning synagogue. The last Jewish wedding in Iraq was held in 2008. The decline of Jews in Iraq can be explained by state repression towards the Jews, in particular after the 1948 establishment of Israel.

The Jews in Syria resettled in Syria around 1000 BC, and later, in year 1492 Jews fled to Syria after the expulsion of the Jews from Spain. Arge communities lived in the regions of Damascus and Aleppo for centuries, while in the beginning of the 20th century, most Syrian Jews emigrated to the US, Central and South America, and Israel. Just as with the case of Iraqi Jews, there is a small elderly Jewish community left in Syria.

As shown, while a high intensity conflict is taking place within the Iraqi and Syrian borders, it can be easy to forget that the mountainous regions contain more than bullets and guns. People with various ethnicities, cultures and languages from several centuries aback, divided up by the Ottoman Empire and European colonial missions, have been inhabiting these areas and made it their home.

KHRAG in Action

THIS year, KHRAG drew many more people into its activities and spread its message beyond its usual constituency. The year saw a successful AGM, information sessions, the expansion of KHRAG News, fundraising activities and street protests.



KHRAG NEWS

Kurdish Human Rights Action Group South Africa

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Editorial

PEACE STILL ON THE AGENDA

THERE are justifiable doubts from many Kurds about the peace process in Turkey, given the blood-shedding and repression which have accompanied it. The government's rhetoric about Turkey's leading position in the Arab Spring has occasionally given cause for hope, but they have not followed through with concerted action. Continued support for the use of the Kurdish language and the teaching of mother tongue in primary schools, the lifting of military restrictions on the levels of political expression and the release of political prisoners will be a welcome sign of progress in Turkey and many more things to wish.

Also, the conflicts in other parts of the Middle East, particularly in Iraq and Syria have shown the region the extent of the violence impacting parts of Kurdistan, especially Rojava in Syria where armed groups of Kurds are defending Kurdish towns, Kurdi, Amadiyah and Cizik against the advance of ISIS. The conflict in Syria is a warning of what could happen if the conflict spreads, it could further limit the expression of Kurdish self-determination and basic human rights.

The above notwithstanding, a few

Is peace process in Turkey back on track?

For many years, there has been talk of a peace process in Turkey aimed at resolving the Kurdish question. This has not been followed up by concrete actions, leaving many people sceptical about what prospects. However, recent initiatives indicate that the peace process may be back on track.

Early last year imprisoned Kurdish leader Abdullah Ocalan announced the cease-fire between the PKK guerrillas and the Turkish military. The PKK fighters withdrew from Turkish territory to their base at the Qandil Mountains. Both parties respected the cease-fire.

Before the guerrillas could completely withdraw, the ISIS protest took place in Istanbul. The result in the case of the withdrawal process.

In August 2014 with the Presidential elections in which the Turkish electorate will for the first time elect the President directly in the past the President was elected by Parliament from the ruling party. The national Parliamentary elections will take place in June 2015.

Certain constitutional changes have taken place in which certain demands of the Kurds have been met. They are identity of the Kurdish people, the teaching of mother tongue in private schools and the use of Kurdish language officially in areas inhabited by the Kurds. The government has also released some political prisoners.

Last month the Turkish Parliament adopted the "Framework Law" titled as "Draft Law to Strengthen and Strengthen Social Integration". It entails a bill of six articles on reforms to help find a peaceful solution to the Kurdish issue. The Law



Members of the ANC Youth League joined a Kurdish protest in the City, in order to show solidarity.

KHRAG News has grown as an information platform over the years.



One of KHRAG's many fundraising activities for the year.



Na'eem Jeenah, Seehaam Samaai and Sid Lockett at the information evening in November

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support and solidarity. In South Africa, KHRAG and local Kurds held a demonstration during September on the steps of St Georges Cathedral in Cape Town. Archbishop Emeritus Desmond Tutu, Judge Essa Moosa, Father Matt Esau and others joined the demonstration.

The following call was made: "we call on the South African government and the national and international community to break their silence in the face of these brutal attacks on the people of Rojava and Kobane."

In order to create awareness among the people of South Africa, KHRAG initiated a series of talks since 23 May 2012 on the struggle of the Kurdish people for the freedom, equality and dignity. On 27 March 2014 our AGM guest speaker, Dr Andrew Nash spoke on the topic: "the Middle East as flashpoint for global capitalism with reference to the Kurdish question."

This was followed on 13 November 2014 by an address by Mr Na'eem Jeenah of the Afro-Middle-East Centre who spoke on the developments in Syria and Iraq with special reference to the role of IS. Sidney Lockett shared his personal experiences on his visit to the refugee camp in Suruc which bordered on Kobane.

As we are now approaching the end of another year, KHRAG News, on behalf of KHRAG, wishes to extend to its readers and members compliments of the season and a happy new year. The new year may throw up many challenges for KHRAG and we, as members, need to prepare ourselves for such challenges, remain steadfast and overcome them with dedication and commitment.

► Sid Lockett reports on his recent trip to Turkey

CAPE TOWN ACTIVIST VISITS REFUGEE CAMP NEAR KOBANE

WHEN I left Cape Town at the beginning of October it had not been confirmed that it would be safe to visit the border-town Suruç about 5 km from Kobanê in neighbouring Syria where the attack by the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) had reached a critical phase.

In fact, it had not even been confirmed that it would be safe to go to Dyarbakir (the unofficial capital of the Kurdish region) where there is ongoing conflict between Kurdish protest groups and the Turkish military and police. High on my agenda on my arrival in Istanbul was to meet with a bureau of human-rights lawyers in Istanbul to make arrangements for my visit to Dyarbakir and to Suruç the border town about 5 km from Kobane. These were no ordinary lawyers. They were akin to the courageous South African lawyers that I got to know during the 1980s. Perhaps even more courageous! I met with six of them – all had spent time in Turkish prisons. A young female lawyer had recently come out of a spell of 4 ½ years in prison and her trial, under a terrorism act, had only just begun.

While waiting for my travel arrangements to be finalised, I participated in a Saturday Mothers sit-in. The mothers, aunts and sisters (there were also fathers, uncles and brothers) have been staging sit-ins in front of the famous Galatasaray Lisesi since the mid 1990s to protest the 'forced disappearances' and political murders of their loved ones during military rule in Turkey during most of the 80s. Kobanê was the last stronghold against the complete control of the area by ISIL. Already thousands of villagers had fled into Turkey



Some 20 000 people are in the refugee camp

illegally, illegally, because of the peculiar position taken by Erdogan, the Turkish premier. For him Kobane is under the control of the 'terrorist organisation' the PKK and its ally the PYD, even though he has been negotiating with the imprisoned PKK leader Abdullah Ocalan leader (the Kurdish Mandela) for a peaceful settlement after centuries of suppression of the Kurds by the Turks and decades of civil war.

The numbers of refugees from Kobane in Suruç were put as high as 200,000 by the Anatolia Region Municipalities. These refugees were staying with relatives where they had some or were sleeping in garages and shops that had been vacated by the owners for their use. Approximately 20,000 refugees were being accommodated in a tent-town set up by the Suruç municipality with the help of local NGOs who were doing their best to provide food and clothing to the refugees, many

of whom had arrived with nothing more than the clothes that they were wearing. I was immediately struck that neither the UNHCR nor UNICEF had a presence in the camp. When I asked my DTK 'guide' about this, I was told that the government had not acknowledged that they had a refugee problem on their hands, a necessary pre-condition for the UN bodies to get involved.

My visit to Suruç was organized by the DTK ('Democratic Society Congress'), an umbrella organization with a structure very similar to the South African UDF of the 1980s.

In Dyarbakir, the informal capital of the Kurdish region, I had a number of meetings with leaders of various organisations affiliated to the DTK. The most poignant of these meetings was with the Economic Commission of the DTK. Poignant because the male co-convenor met Chris Hani during the 1980s and reminisced very fondly about his time with comrade Chris. I was asked to explain why the SACP and the ANC had deviated so far from the vision that comrade Chris had held and he recognized the dangers that formal state power held for their own struggle for a democratic and economically just future.



A mother and son in the refugee camp outside Kobane



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