

Bodyguard claims Saddam has visited Baghdad safe houses

ONE of Saddam Hussein's former bodyguards has claimed that the ousted Iraqi leader has returned several times to Baghdad since the city fell in April, writes Mark Franchetti. American forces have repeatedly come close to catching Saddam, he said.

Abdulrahman Khalaf, who spent 12 years guarding the former president, said he was moving between safe houses several times a day. Saddam is understood to be guarded by an elite force of 25 who work in shifts and do not venture out in groups of more than three.

"I have heard from people close to Saddam how several times he moved out of a safe house only three or four hours before the Americans raided it," said Khalaf.

"Ten times they were very close after acting on tip-offs supplied by spies and informants who dream of cashing in the \$25m reward for information leading to his capture. He is being well guarded and I think he will never be caught."

Khalaf, who was with Saddam until April 12, three days after he was last seen in public, said the Americans

came close to finding the former leader during raids in Baghdad, Tikrit, Diyala province and Mosul, where his sons, Qusay and Uday, were killed in July.

According to Khalaf — seen beside Saddam in television footage of his last public appearance — the president embraced Qusay and broke down in tears when he realised the Americans were about to take Baghdad. He was then moved to two safe houses on Palestine Street and Morocco Street in the city centre that have not yet been found by American forces.

"Saddam was shocked when the city fell the next day," Khalaf said. "He believed the capital was well defended and that the Republican Guards would fight to the death. He was sure we could hold out for six months. He was angry and felt betrayed by his tribe and by the Republican Guards."

Khalaf, once one of 150 elite presidential bodyguards, said Saddam had moved out of his lavish palaces a few days before the war began.

He spent the entire American bombing campaign in and around Baghdad, moving

between 15 carefully selected safe houses up to four times a day. Abid Hamid Mahmud, his private secretary, who has since been detained by US forces, was constantly by his side.

Khalaf said Saddam had stopped using satellite telephones and radios to avoid detection by American spy planes. His handwritten personal orders were delivered to ministers and military leaders by messengers.

This became increasingly difficult as the war entered its second and third week, however, leading to a total breakdown in

communication with local commanders.

Throughout the bombing campaign Saddam largely kept away from his family, with the exception of Qusay, who controlled the state security and intelligence services. On one occasion Saddam sent a message to Qusay and Uday, urging them to remain apart for fear that both could be killed by a single US airstrike. They ignored his warning.

Khalaf said Saddam ate daily meals of hummus, chicken and lamb prepared by his personal cook, but also had the occa-

sional takeaway kebab from Al-Saah restaurant in Baghdad's fashionable Mansour district.

American forces dropped a bomb on a house near the restaurant in early April. Khalaf said Saddam had been seen driving through the area earlier that day.

"During the war he took all his meals with a small group of his guards," recalled Khalaf. "He didn't like to eat alone. During meals he would ask about our families and once in a while he would crack a joke."

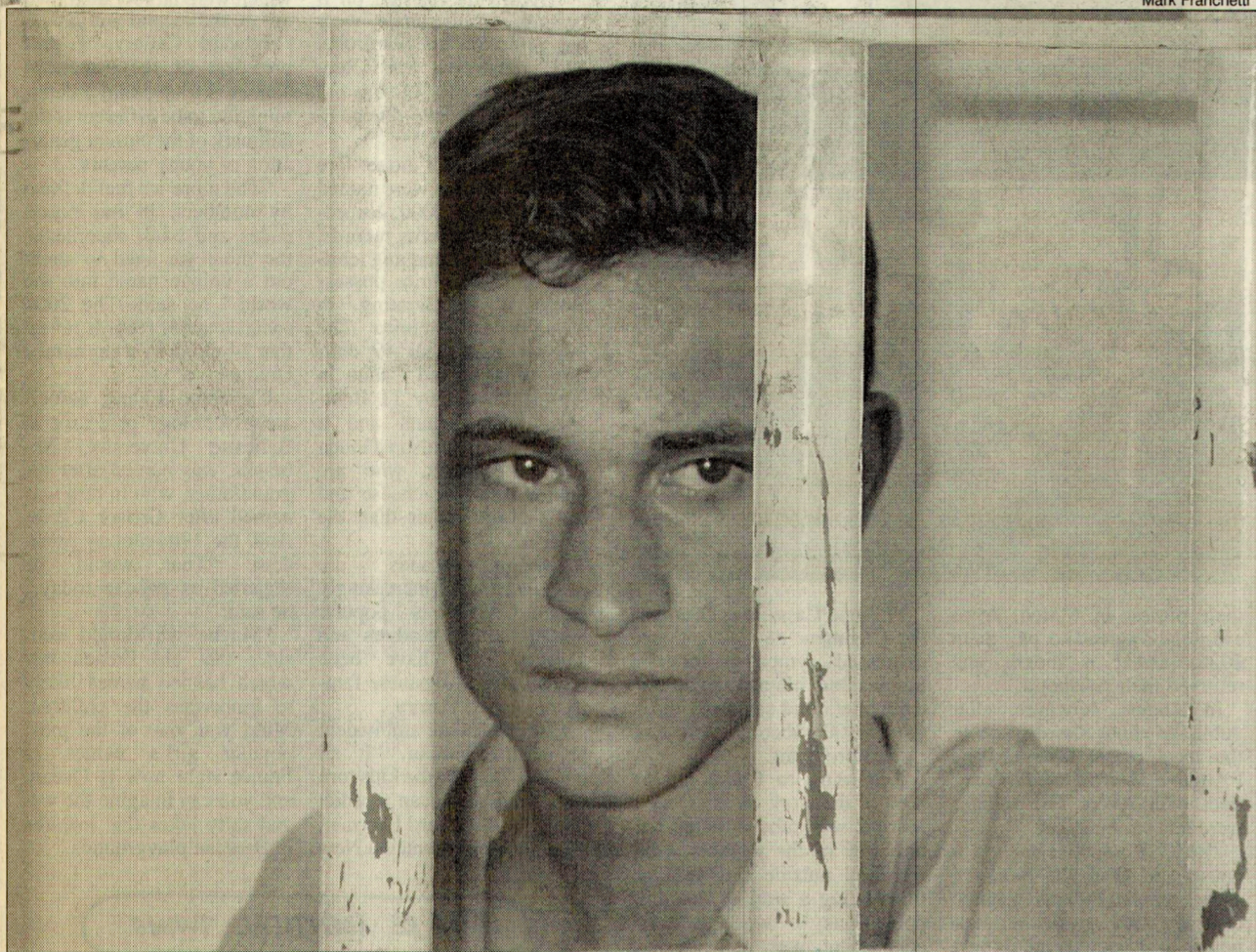
"Once for instance he said that we should start dyeing our

hair because people would start to talk about our greying hair, saying that Saddam's guards were getting old like the president."

Khalaf said Saddam tried to put a brave face on events as the war turned rapidly against him. "But with us we could see that he was angry, sad and depressed about what was happening," he said.

"He would never have accepted offers of safe passage. He'd rather die here — no question. Or maybe one day he'll come back to power. That's my dream."

Mark Franchetti



Akhmed, the latest honour killer, who gunned down his mother, half-brother and four-year-old sister with an AK-47

Thomas Coex



An Iraqi bride: those suspected of having sex before marriage may be targeted

Iraqi women die in 'honour' murders

THE baby-faced 17-year-old seemed an unlikely spree killer as he sipped his glass of tea in a Baghdad police station and quietly awaited his fate. Too young to grow the moustache that all Iraqi men wear to signify their masculinity, the boy in tattered clothes was treated gently by two policemen questioning him under armed guard.

They shared a cigarette with him, patted him on the back and saw no need to handcuff him. It was only when he began to confess — in a casual, matter-of-fact manner — that the full horror of his crime became clear.

He had walked into Jazaar police station in north Baghdad hours earlier to give himself up after shooting his mother, his half-brother and his four-year-old sister with an AK-47 at point-blank range. His victims' bodies were still lying in pools of blood where he had left them. He had fired nearly 20 bullets.



Mark Franchetti Baghdad

a gun off the streets. I was afraid of getting arrested before I could kill them. "But since the Americans came, buying a gun is no problem. I found a Kalashnikov for \$35 (£21) with a full magazine of 30 bullets."

One morning a week ago the boy's mother, Senija, 50, returned briefly to the original family home. As she rummaged in an old trunk, still dressed in the black veil Iraqi women wear when they go out in the street, Akhmed crept up behind her with the machinegun. He shot her five times then rolled up her body in plastic sheeting and pushed her into a corner.

Next he went looking for his half-brother at the family's new home. "He was sleeping outside in the yard, where it's cooler," Akhmed said. "Jenan was sleeping by his side. I pulled out the Kalashnikov."

"Ali woke up and had just enough time to recognise me. I fired and hit him nine times. Then I shot Jenan because I am sure that my mother had her with Ali, not with my father. So she was my half-sister but she was still their child. I had to kill them all to wash away the scan-

dal and uphold my family's good name. It's not a crime. It was my duty to punish them."

Akhmed went freely to the police because under Iraqi law, honour killings are not considered a grave offence. If investigators confirm his story he will face a maximum sentence of one year in prison.

Although such killings were treated with the same leniency under Saddam, police say they have risen rapidly in recent months, particularly in Shi'ite rural areas where moral and religious codes are strictly observed.

According to the Organisation of Women's Freedom in Iraq, a group set up after the fall of Saddam, dozens of young Iraqi women have died at the hands of male relatives in honour killings since President George W Bush declared major combat operations over in May. In most cases the perpetrators remain at large.

"We know of cases when even rape victims are killed by their brothers, uncles or fathers because they are accused of having brought shame to the family," said Leila Mohammed, one of the group's co-founders. "Often the killings are to punish a young girl who lost her virginity before marriage."

Last month the group wrote to Paul Bremer, the US administrator in Iraq, denouncing the wave of crime against Iraqi women including rape, abductions and honour killings. The group has yet to receive an answer.

According to Mohammed, a 16-year-old girl in a village in southern Iraq was recently shot dead by her father and left on a rubbish dump because she had fled the home of her stepmother, who had been mistreat-

the lovers moved to another house where they lived together in secret with Akhmed and his sister Jenan.

In Saddam City, a working-class Shi'ite district of Baghdad known for its poverty and religious fervour, the neighbours began to gossip. The boy, who eked out a living selling second-hand electrical appliances in a market, decided to take matters into his own hands.

"I had wanted to kill them ever since I found out they were sleeping together," he said, drawing on a cheap Iraqi cigarette. "Under Saddam I was too scared to take revenge. The biggest problem was trying to buy

The boy, Akhmed, whose full name has been withheld by the police, was responsible for Iraq's latest "honour killings" — revenge murders carried out to restore the reputation of a family shamed by scandal. Most such killings are of young Iraqi women who have rebelled against a strict moral code. They have increased sharply amid the breakdown in security that has blighted Iraq since the fall of Saddam Hussein.

A meek youth who weighs little more than 7st, Akhmed said that more than three years ago he discovered that his mother was having an affair with Ali, his elderly father's son from a previous marriage. He had once seen them having sex and had been so shocked that he had not told anyone.

Last year his father died and

TWO KILLED AT CHECKPOINT

AT LEAST two Iraqi civilians were killed by American soldiers, apparently as they tried to drive through a checkpoint near Falluja, west of the capital, on Friday night. Several people were injured, including a 10-year-old girl.

US troops found a large

cache of weapons, including 23 surface-to-air missiles, buried in an orchard near Tikrit yesterday.

In Baghdad a heavily guarded hotel used by US military officers and civilian staff was hit by three missiles or rocket-propelled grenades. Nobody was hurt.

ing her. Another girl was shot by her uncle two months ago because she had been raped.

Since the formal end of the war Iraq has seen a collapse of law and order. In Baghdad, a city of more than 5m people, there are still fewer than 5,000 American-trained police officers. Under Saddam crime rates were exceptionally low, mainly because of the regime's harsh punishments including death by hanging. Now carjackings, rape, armed robberies, kidnappings and bloody score-settling have become commonplace.

The explosion of violence is partly attributable to Saddam's release of 100,000 prisoners last October. They included some of Iraq's most brutal gangsters. Now that electricity and running water have been largely restored to Baghdad the lack of security is the greatest source of resentment against American forces in Iraq.

In May, 462 people were brought to the city's central morgue. Eighty per cent had died from gunshot wounds, some as a result of accidents, especially celebratory gunfire. The figure rose to 626 in June,

751 in July and 872 in August.

"Security is now the biggest problem for us women in Iraq," said Amal, a 33-year-old woman in hiding from her father and brothers, who have vowed to kill her.

"Crimes against women are on the increase because there is no law and order any more and because the Islamic fundamentalists who think women are worth nothing are gaining greater power."

Amal knew she would face her family's wrath when she eloped three years ago with the man she loved and later married. Ali asked her father's permission to marry her but was turned down because he was divorced. The couple fled Baghdad and moved to Kurdish-controlled northern Iraq, where they settled down and had Hejran, their daughter, who is now 14 months old.

They felt safe, mainly because under Saddam they were doubted that her male relatives would violate travel restrictions

to hunt her down. But the man who had married her younger sister divorced her because of the shame Amal had brought upon her family. Amal's own life was shattered shortly after the war.

No longer feeling safe now that Iraqis could move freely, the family moved back to Baghdad, a teeming city where it would be easier to hide. They were recently taken in by a women's group and are now living out of a suitcase, regularly changing accommodation to elude her male relatives.

"I live in fear now," she said. "I have no doubts whatsoever that my father or brothers will kill me and my husband if they find us."

Back at the police station Akhmed was led away to his cell, shuffling in a pair of torn plastic sandals. He agreed to pose for a photograph and, despite his crimes, smiled shyly. As the metal gate was locked behind him he shook my hand through the iron bars.

"I'll serve my year in jail and then get out," he said. "I don't regret what I did. Far from it. It was my duty. I feel liberated."

Kofi Annan on Iraq News Review, page 3