

LETTER FROM KUWAIT BY JOCELYN COULON



The Kuwait Airways plane begins its descent to the Emirate. It is almost midnight on this early October night.

In a matter-of-fact voice, a flight attendant announces to the passengers that shortly they will be able to see the burning oil wells.

As the plane approaches the landing-strip, Kuwait's oilfields are clearly visible. In a few weeks, all this will be just a bad memory. To the great relief of Kuwaitis and Kuwait's Finance Minister, teams of mainly US and Canadian firefighters will have extinguished all the oil fires. The destruction of 735 oil wells by the Iraqis, accomplished in the last few hours before they evacuated Kuwait at the end of February, cost the Emirate the tidy sum of US \$45 billion in lost export revenue.

The firefighters worked hard, especially the Canadians. When they arrived in Kuwait in April they thought they could put out perhaps one fire a day. But thanks to new technology and reinforcements from countries as varied as Iran, Romania and China, by the summer they were able to accelerate the rate of fire extinctions to four a day. And it is the firefighters from a Canadian company based in Alberta which holds the record: more than 160 fires extinguished compared to the vaunted American Red Adair team who managed barely a hundred.

The oil has caused enormous environmental destruction across Kuwait – spills in huge quantities on land and sea. The oil fires formed large clouds of smoke saturating the air with millions of tiny drops of black oil – this in one of the Middle East's most modern and aseptic societies. The experience has been very traumatic for Kuwaitis. Every morning since liberation, they ask themselves whether the air they are going to breathe that day will make them sick, or whether their clothes will be soiled the moment they step outside.

If the problem of the oil well fires is almost solved, the same

cannot be said for the difficulties created by the thousands of mines and bombs strewn throughout the country. Planted across Kuwait during the Gulf War by both sides, the Iraqi forces in particular dumped and buried them along tens of kilometres of Kuwait's southern border with Saudi Arabia. The daily human tragedies caused by these mines and unexploded bombs goes largely unnoticed by the outside world.

Two types of explosive were used during the war. While the multinational coalition used bombs, the Iraqis had a predilection for mines. Every time the allies bombed the Emirate or southern Iraq, they loosed hundreds of

small bombs aimed at particular targets – not all of them exploded. Although the coalition forces have located and defused thousands of them, some are especially difficult to find. Equipped with small parachutes, when the wind blows they move around, making the task of locating them that much harder. A few weeks ago, some young Kuwaitis were killed in their own school yard after running over one of these devices.

But the explosives which wreak most havoc are those left by the Iraqis. Throughout their seven-month occupation of Kuwait, Iraqi forces buried all sorts of mines. They were everywhere: along the Saudi border, along the Gulf coast, in the sea itself, in among the oilfields, and in certain im-

portant buildings and strategic sites. Here too, the allied forces began the meticulous task of defusing. The French took care of the beaches. They removed, almost always by hand, more than 15,000 mines. The Canadians looked after the demilitarized zone between Kuwait and Iraq where they have neutralized some 8,000 explosive devices. There are still more to find, and teams from the UK, Pakistan, Egypt and Bangladesh are still cleaning up, but not without tragic accidents. The day I left, six Egyptian soldiers died trying to defuse a mine.

Before setting out to visit the southern sector of the demilitarized zone, one of the most heavily mined areas of Kuwait, I paid close attention to the leaflets distributed in all the hotels. Presented was a detailed description of the size, colour and purpose of the explosives found all over the country, accompanied by a drawing of the device in question. I kept this paper with me.

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Our helicopter leaves Dohar where the headquarters of the UN Iraq-Kuwait Observer Mission (UNIKOM) has been set up temporarily. The machine heads for lookout post S4 on the border between Iraq, Kuwait and Saudi Arabia. After meeting up with some of the UNIKOM staff, we take off again to fly over the minefields which are easily discernible from the air. The helicopter is piloted by two Chileans who scan the ground for Kuwaitis or Iraqis who might have penetrated the demilitarized zone. For some weeks now, UNIKOM has been faced with a task not foreseen in its original mandate: to spot Iraqi civilians who've come to dig up mines in Kuwait. In

most instances, these people – children, women and old men – are hurt, or worse, killed outright by stepping on a mine. And each time, the military personnel of UNIKOM have to rush in with a helicopter or a truck to evacuate the victims to the nearest hospital.

After about fifteen minutes in the air, the pilots point out some Iraqi civilians running across the sand. When they catch sight of the helicopter, they stand still and wave to us. One of them is carrying a long shovel used to unearth mines. If the group manages to collect a few and get back across the frontier into Iraq, the Iraqi military will pay for them. Apparently, the Iraqi army is attempting to replenish its stock of munitions. But more often than not, payment for these mad escapades into the minefields comes in the form of a trip to the hospital with a missing limb, or even death. And so it is the poorest Iraqis who pay.

For the moment, the Chilean pilots can do nothing. They relay the position of the Iraqis to headquarters from where a truck will be sent to pick up the intruders and take them back across the border – until the next time. One of the pilots told us that some Iraqis, already missing limbs, return to try their luck again. At UNIKOM headquarters, the spokesperson, Abdellatif Kabbaj, shows me photographs of maimed Iraqis.

Back in Dohar, I greet Canadian soldiers who, for six months, have been building and moving UN observation posts, and ridding the demilitarized zone of mines – all in temperatures between 40 and 65 degrees Celsius. The car which takes me back to the hotel has no air-conditioning so I decide to plunge into the ocean to cool off. But then I recall the mines, still floating about in the Persian Gulf. Perhaps the bathtub in the hotel isn't so bad after all. □

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(translation by Veronica Baruffati and Michael Bryans)