

## First contact in 22 years



The search for missing relatives has been a decade-long process for many Iraqis.

*Few people in Iraq have not suffered from the tragic consequences of the series of wars. For Farida it all began in 1981 when her family was forced to go to Iran. She remained in Iraq with no news from her relatives for 22 years.*

The fate of Farida, a 37-year-old Iraqi, could easily be turned into a film. The ICRC and the Iraqi Red Crescent regularly allow families separated by the war to make free two-minute calls with satellite phones. On 4 May 2003 Farida availed herself of this opportunity in Basra.

An ICRC delegate observed a tall, elegant woman, dressed in a black chador, whose delicate face was streaming with tears. She had difficulty in articulating her first name on the phone. "It's me, Farida, your little sister, do you remember me? Yes, it's me and I'm alive!" This was the first time in 22 years that Farida heard the voice of her brother in Tehran. Emotion was at its peak, and even the Red Crescent volunteers present couldn't believe what they heard though they had witnessed hundreds of calls every day for weeks.

*"I never saw my father, my mother or my three brothers again"*

Once she had hung up, Farida tried to regain her composure and then confided: "In 1981, at the beginning of the war with Iran, my family and I lived in Baghdad. One weekend my parents had sent me to my grandmother's in Basra. They were never able to come and get me. I never saw my father, my mother or my three brothers again."

After several weeks without news, the girl begged her grandmother to take her to Baghdad. In the capital they learned that her whole family had been given a few hours to leave, empty-handed. "We were all accused of having Iranian blood, seven generations back. That was all our neighbours who had been there could tell us."

### Most of her time hidden inside

Farida's grandmother had no resources and had to place her granddaughter with a foster family. Her adoptive parents were terrorized by the thought that they were sheltering someone "politically incorrect." Farida spent most of her time hidden inside. "Everyone, my neighbours, the people around me, even my adoptive family told me never to try and contact my family. Some of them held



high government positions and were very afraid of reprisals, just because they frequented me,” she went on to say.

The war between Iran and Iraq had tragic consequences for a great many families on both sides of the border: civilians and military killed in combat, prisoners of war, tens of thousands of missing, families and friends separated by the front... During the conflict the ICRC collected and distributed, in cooperation with the authorities concerned and the two Red Crescent Societies, more than 12 million messages, thus facilitating the maintenance of family ties.

Though Farida was constantly afraid of being recognized and despaired at growing up alone, she made her way in life. She found a job as secretary in a maritime freight company in Basra and got along well with her colleagues at work, but continued to live in utter solitude, trapped by the secret of her distant origins which she was afraid to divulge, even to her closest friends.



*The ICRC and the Iraqi Red Crescent regularly allow families separated by the war to make free two-minute calls with satellite phones.*

One day Farida found a helping hand, Mohammed, the manager of a small music shop where she regularly bought cassettes. A friendship developed between them and she finally confided in him. Mohammed agreed to share her secret. They got married and had two children.

Farida was lovely in the photos in her wedding album, but she wasn't smiling. She was grateful to this man who loved her without conditions, but she missed her exiled family more than ever on this festive day. Where were they? What had they become? Were they still alive? Farida was constantly haunted by these questions gnawing away at her.

### **“Nothing else, not even bullets or death, counted”**

Then something incredible happened. Just as Baghdad was under full attack by the coalition forces, she learned that a friend of her family was in the capital. She risked her life to go to Baghdad. Fighting was fierce but, one by one, she crossed the military roadblocks and finally found this most fortunate

contact who gave her the telephone number of one of her brothers in Iran. “Nothing else, not even bullets or death, counted then. I was solely focused on finding my family.” One thing happened after another until that wonderful day she heard her brother's voice for the first time in more than twenty years.

Farida's employer has temporarily closed his business. “We have practically no income but my delight at having resumed contact with my family and at providing my children with a grandmother and uncles is currently greater than this concern. I have only one desire, for us to live all together as long as we are alive,” she said.

---

#### **XXVIII<sup>e</sup>**

#### **Conférence internationale**

de la Croix-Rouge et du Croissant-Rouge  
Genève 2003

#### **Comité d'organisation**

Case postale 372, CH-1211 Genève 19,  
Suisse

#### **XXVIII<sup>th</sup>**

#### **International Conference**

of the Red Cross and Red Crescent  
Geneva 2003

#### **Organizing Committee**

P.O. Box 372, CH-1211 Geneva 19,  
Switzerland

#### **XXVIII**

#### **Conferencia Internacional**

de la Cruz Roja y de la Media Luna Roja  
Ginebra 2003

#### **Comité de organización**

Apartado postal 372, CH-1211 Ginebra 19,  
Suiza