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Saddam colonel 'saw thousands murdered';
WAR AFTERMATH: OFFICER CLAIMS HE WITNESSED SLAUGHTER OF CIVILIANS IN MASS
GRAVES, WHILE VICTOR TOMMY FRANKS ENTERS SADDAM PALACE

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AN IRAQI colonel in the Iraqi internal security service today claims he has damning evidence directly linking Saddam Hussein to a series of horrific crimes against humanity.

He has testified in chilling detail to witnessing thousands of innocent men, women and children being murdered by Saddam's henchmen and buried in mass desert graves.

United Nations investigators are set to launch an immediate investigation into the colonel's claims of Kurds and Shi'ite muslims being herded into the graves before being either shot or buried alive.

Drawing comparisons with Nazi extermination of the Jews, the officer told the Evening Standard that Kurds were packed 200 at a time into trucks and driven to the Al Anbar desert west of Baghdad or desert areas near Tharthar, north-west of the capital. They had been told they were to be "relocated", but those who survived the journey were murdered.

Thousands of Shias, too, were buried in the same two areas, the colonel said. Tharthar, north-west of Baghdad, is where Saddam built a "green palace" with an artificial lake so he could go fishing.

The UN High Commission for Human Rights has numerous reports of unsolved disappearances of Kurds and Shias dating back 20 years. The officer, who wants to remain anonymous, has offered to help investigators and says other officers are prepared to come forward.

He sought no money for his testimony. "I saw thousands killed and buried in mass graves," he said.

"Some were lined up and machine-gunned before being covered with sand.

Others were just buried alive."

While there is no proof of these claims so far, they could justify Prime Minister Tony Blair and President George Bush's decision to wage war on Iraq.

The colonel was a member of Al-Amn al-'Amm, the force responsible for policing political activity, from 1982 to 1999. The Standard has seen his service identification.

During the Eighties, he said, the Kurds of northern Iraq were slaughtered wholesale.

"Saddam had a programme of telling villagers they were being relocated south," he said. "We would take trucks that would normally hold 12 to 15 people and put in 200 with no water or ventilation.

"Many would die on the way.

Survivors were driven to Al Anbar or Tharthar and buried alive in vast holes dug in the ground. I saw thousands of people - men, women and children - die this way."

After the Shi'ite uprisings in the south following the first Gulf War, Saddam ordered his intelligence services, the Republican Guard and the Al-Amn al-'Amm to round up all Shia males between 20 and 40.

"We took thousands from Shia areas in Kerbala, Najaf, Basra, Mosul, Kut, Babylon and from Saddam City in Baghdad and they were bused into the desert.

Then they were shot and buried.

"At one base in Muhaywir in the northern part of the Al Anbar desert , I saw a line of men maybe 3km long. One officer would ask each man his name and before he could reply another would shoot him in the back of the head." The colonel also told of thousands of political executions. "We had permission to kill anyone," he said. "We had a thousand ways of killing and all were used."

People were killed for the slightest criticism of Saddam, or for making a joke. "We would take people to the police station and give them a drink laced with sodium fluoroacetate or thallium, poisons for killing rats.

Then we would let them go. Later, they would die and no one knew it was us.

"Many officers hated Saddam and hated what we had to do. But if we refused, we and every member of our families would have been killed.

"Believe me, the British and Americans have done us a great service getting rid of Saddam."

Karim Jhezroaui, UN human-rights co-ordinator in Iraq, asked yesterday for details of the colonel's claims.

"We have many reports of Kurds and Shias being killed and details of many disappearances," he said. "We will crosscheck these claims with the ones we already have."