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A&E [FILM EVENT]

February 9, 2006

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The people behind the persecution

Kurdish film fest features "Good Kurds, Bad Kurds" and the man behind much of it

By Don M. Burrows

Kani Xulam could face deportation to a hostile country next month. In the meantime, he's doing all he can to educate others about his Kurdish people.

Once labeled a "rebel leader" by the Turkish government, Xulam will appear at a charity film event that will show two independent documentaries about the plight of the Kurds in Iraq and Turkey. One of the films features Xulam prominently.

For Xulam and others, the struggle for attention to the Kurds situation is tied to the U.S. Thus, he repeatedly appears in Kevin McKiernan's 2001 "Good Kurds, Bad Kurds," which depicts the United States' two-faced stance toward Iraqi Kurds and those fighting against Turkey for independence.



PHOTO COPYRIGHT KEVIN MCKIERMAN

Director Kevin McKiernan shows whom the two-faced U.S. would consider the "bad" Kurds fighting for independence in Turkey.

Xulam has been caught up personally in this geopolitical drama. Singled out by Turkey as a

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dangerous leader thanks to his lobbying in Washington, D.C., he was arrested and tried for putting a false name on his immigration papers and threatened with deportation.

When a court ordered that he be given political asylum, the U.S. government appealed the decision, something it rarely does. Xulam says he now faces a court hearing March 14 after his case was remanded, and the judge will decide how to interpret events that have occurred in Turkey since his asylum was recommended in 1996.

"The point I make is, Turkey is as dangerous as it was before, and the Kurds don't have any more rights," he said, adding that the European Union's efforts to ensure rights protections have been less than effective. "The situation has improved a little bit, but not much."

The 25 million Kurds worldwide constitute the largest ethnic group without a homeland, according to McKiernan, and Xulam and others still hope for the independent Kurdistan promised after World War I.

"Whether the Bush administration intended it or not, it has introduced an element of rights into the Middle East," Xulam said. "I think in the long run we have hope for an independent Kurdistan."

McKiernan's documentary led him to Kurdish struggles in Turkey and Iraq, after which he said no media outlet would take his story. Back home in Santa Barbara, Calif., McKiernan happened upon a family of Kurdish immigrants. Among them was Xulam, who along with his siblings was then running a Maytag repair shop before his foray into politics.

McKiernan's film takes us from guerilla hideouts of Kurdish insurgents to Washington, D.C., where Xulam lines up congressmen to oppose U.S. arms sales to Turkey, arms that allegedly have been

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used against Kurdish villages.

The film focuses on the armed insurgence of the PKK, the Kurdish workers' party, under the direction of Abdullah "Apo" (Uncle) Ocalan, considered a terrorist by the Turks and a liberation leader by many Kurds.

"Kurdish identity was buried in a grave," the leader says in one interview. "And we dug it up and ripped the top off the casket."

Ocalan was later captured by Turkey and his ordered execution stayed because of pressure from the European Union, which Turkey hopes to join.

McKiernan's film closes in 2001, leaving the major events that followed unexplored. Xulam said the United States involvement in Iraq has changed the dynamic of the Kurds in many ways.

"I personally think that the U.S. presence in Iraq " if there's a beneficiary to that foreign policy " has helped the Kurds," he said.

KURDISH HUMAN RIGHTS AND CIVIL SOCIETY CHARITY EVENT

FEATURING: Screenings of "Good Kurds, Bad Kurds" and "Jiyan" and an appearance by Kani Xulam

WHEN: 2 to 7 p.m.

Saturday; "Good Kurds, Bad Kurds," at 2 p.m.; "Jiyan" at 4:30 p.m.

WHERE: 25 Mondale Hall

TICKETS: \$6 students, \$7.50 public

In part, this was aided by Turkey's own refusal in 2003 to allow U.S. forces to invade Iraq through its territory. Xulam said this exposed a rift between an alliance he and others think has contributed to America's blind eye toward Kurdish suffering there.

In addition, Kurds in Iraq are now being granted privileges and rights also sought in Turkey, he said.

"That is causing a lot of consternation in Turkey,"

he said. "They know that if they succeed, the Kurds in Turkey will ask for the same."

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