

## **Kormori Bchwk - the Forgotten Village**

“They promised us many job opportunities and a better road. However only two men were hired over the last two years. Most of us have to work outside the village now, we were hoping for jobs with Dana Gas but they lied to us!”

Five other men nod in affirmation as Kak Hassan tells the CPT team of some of the hardships his community faces daily from the presence of their unwanted powerful neighbor. Kormori Bchwk (Small Kormor) is a remote village of 22 families, seven out of which live there permanently and fifteen seasonally. It is not easy to find Kormor, especially coming from Sulaimani, which lies some two and half hours of drive away. It is surrounded by thousands of low treeless hills stretching for miles in all directions and towards the nearby unclear borderline between Kurdistan and what is left of Iraq and just a recent front-line against Daesh (ISIS). This scarcely populated area which Saddam Hussein turned into an example of his commitment to genocide Kurds, falls under the sphere of administration of the district mayor of Chamchamal, which lies some 90 km away, and under the sub-district mayor of the nearest town of Qadir Karam.



Kak Hassan talking to CPTers at his home in Kormor. Photo by: Rezhia Fakhir

Kak Hassan continues speaking, nods of affirmation by others in the room accompany his words. "Dana Gas blocked off a road that we used before they came. It was much shorter. Now it takes us at least 40 minutes of driving to reach the nearby towns, the journey should take half

of that time but because the road is not fixed, we have to drive carefully to avoid the various potholes in the road that Dana Gas promised to renovate over two years ago."

On the way to the village CPTers experienced the "new" road first hand. It was heavily damaged and barely passable because of the hundreds of tankers that run it daily, a journey that should have taken 25 minutes, took twice as long. Many residents of Kormor need to take the road at least twice a day on their way to / from schools and work in the nearby towns. There is no school or medical clinic in Kormori Bchwk. Only two villagers out of all the families are employed by Dana Gas, contrary to the reported company's promises.

Dana Gas together with its partner Crescent Petroleum<sup>1</sup> came to the region in 2007 and confiscated land that the villagers used for farming and grazing animals. The companies paid out some compensations which were far from adequate, according to the villagers. Since then, they built a massive natural gas well and processing facility that supplies liquid gas to power plants producing electricity, that more than 4 million residents of Iraqi Kurdistan use.



Dana Gas's compound in Kormor. Photo by: Rezhia Fakhir

Kak Hassan's neighbour took his turn to speak: "Since Dana Gas has started working here we are lacking water. The company dug for water in so many places around our village that the natural springs dried out. They built a water project that takes our water for their own facility and also for Qadir Karam subdistrict but leaves no water for us. Now we are dependent on the limited water they provide us with. Furthermore, we are having so many health problems

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<sup>1</sup> Both companies are based in Sharjah, United Arab Emirates and together are the major private sector investor in Iraqi Kurdistan.

because of the various types of chemicals and gas that has been spread in the area after Dana Gas coming here."

Kak Hassan added: "they promised to build hospitals, schools and a stadium in Small Kormor and two nearby villages. They also promised the renovations of the road, jobs in the company's compound and many more things. However none of that happened. We are fed up. We tried all that we could think of. We don't see any other way than to act and ask the company to respect our existence and rights."

CPT has been meeting with the people of Kormori Bchwk, advocating for better conditions of their lives and amplifying their struggle since May 2016. On 1 November 2016, CPT members came to Kormor again, this time upon the villagers' invitation to observe and accompany them in their public protest and road blockade.

**The following text is the CPTers' account of the public action and further events**

#### **A peaceful demonstration ended with arrest**

We accompanied Kak Hasan and the rest of the villagers to their demonstration site. There were no media or journalists present, probably because another of the teachers' demonstrations was taking place in Suleimani. The villagers used their vehicles to cut off the road, a few minutes later the company trucks and tankers arrived and seemed astonished by the scene. The drivers came out of their trucks and the villagers approached them and explained what was going on. The villagers shook hands with the drivers and greeted them politely, but refused to let the trucks go through even though the drivers pleaded with them to allow them pass to the nearby parking lot.



Kak Hassan and other villagers explaining their struggle to CPT. Photo by: Kasia Protz

After 20 minutes passed since the start of the blockade, the company's security team arrived to the location. Their leader turned out to be Kak Hassan's friend. They shook hands and exchanged kisses on the cheeks as is customary between friends in Kurdistan. They latter asked Kak Hassan and the rest of the villagers to move the blockade line 100 meters down the road so that the first 3 blocked trucks can go to their destination, which according to the security was the front-line in Kirkuk. We observed the villagers move the blockade 100 meters away. It seemed that this move weakened the blockade line. We could see several trucks manage to go around them and pass behind the blockade.

The demonstration was very peaceful and the discussions between the security personnel, the drivers and the villagers were respectful, therefore we decided to return to Sulaimani and follow up with Kak Hasan about the demonstration and Dana Gas response to their demands later.

In the evening, we received a phone call from Kak Hassan's younger brother who told us that his brother was arrested by the Asaish, security forces of Qadir Karam. He said that the Asaish promised to take kak Hassan to a meeting with the Chamchamal district mayor to whom he can communicate the villagers' demands, if they agree to end the demonstration. Kak Hassan went with the Asaish who instead of taking him to the mayor took him to their jail in Qadir Karam. The young man asked CPT to go see his brother, which was not possible to do on that day anymore. That evening we phoned the mayor of Chamchamal who denied having any information of the arrest or its reasons.

### **CPT meets kak Hassan at the Asaish prison**

We left early the next morning and drove to the Asaish office in Chamchamal to find out more about Kak Hassan's situation and the reason why he was arrested, which was still very unclear and surprising for everyone. When we arrived to the Asaish compound we asked to meet with the director of Asaish and were told to wait. We saw Kak Hassan's brothers and some villagers from Kormor leaving after their meeting with the director. At first the Asaish officers thought that we were from Dana Gas company. After learning that we are from a human rights organization and that we were with Kak Hassan during the demonstration, they asked us: "Can you talk to the company, so that they do not file any complaint against him?" They also told us that they really appreciated that we were there.

The director informed us that Kak Hassan was arrested under Act 10 of Iraqi law: "organizing a protest without a permission from the government" and allowed us to meet him. He was handcuffed and still very surprised for getting arrested. He said to us and the office personnel: "I know that I'm innocent and I know that I shouldn't be punished". Then they took him away for an interrogation and assured us that he will be released and his phone returned.

As there was nothing else we could do for him, we drove back to Sulaimani. After we arrived back to our office, Kak Hassan called us himself: "I got released on 1 million Iraqi dinars<sup>2</sup> bail and will need to face the court later this year."

### **Follow-up meetings and court hearings**

On 10 November CPT came back to Kormor to meet with kak Hassan and other residents to further document their situation. The team collected more stories and took a video footage with a plan to make a documentary. CPT learned that Dana Gas accused kak Hassan of endangerment of company's vehicles and private property, and of robbery. This charge was later dropped.

On 14 November CPT met kak Hasan at the court in Chamchamal where his case was opened. The court released him on additional bail of 500,000 Iraqi Dinars<sup>3</sup>. His case may take months to resolve. CPT hopes that the court will eventually find Kak Hassan not guilty based on the fact that the community organized the action and not him.

Kak Hassan next hearing took place on 4 December. CPT members accompanied him at the court and two CPTers testified about what they observed. Kak Hassan will face more hearings in the court, he asked CPT to accompany him, we will keep you updated.

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<sup>2</sup> approximately \$860 USD

<sup>3</sup> approx. \$430 USD