

Into Iraq's Kurdish Area

In May 2010 I had a chance to enter the Kurdish area in Iraq. I mainly stayed at the Kurdish autonomous region's capital of Erbil, which, contrary to my expectations, proved to be a large city. In Erbil, motorways were being built and new hotels and shopping centers were going up. The first European style shopping mall in Iraq was also in Dohuk, in the northern part of the Kurdish area.

There are three Kurdish autonomous regions in Iraq in the northern-most prefectures of Erbil, Suleimania and Dohuk. The population is estimated to be 6 million and is mostly comprised of Kurdish people. The northern part of the Kurdish area is dominated by steep mountains that contrast with the gentle plains in the south. Currently, Kurdistan regional government is granted a high degree of autonomy and have established administrative structures that are largely independent from the central Iraqi government; these have been working on their own post-war reconstruction activities (although there is opposition to this from the central government). The Kurdish area has a relatively high amount of rainfall in the Iraqi territory and various crops are grown including wheat and pulses. In recent years, vegetable farming has also been increasing. In the mountain area, walnuts and fruits such as apricots and apples are widely grown and goats and sheep are kept.

I heard that the Kurdish districts used to be the food basket of Iraq. However, because of the civil war and an exodus of refugees, agricultural production suffered major damage and to date has not recovered. The core of agricultural production is wheat and this is still largely dependent on rainfall with only a few farms equipped with irrigation facilities. This makes production unstable and characterized by large yearly fluctuations in yields. It seems that farmers are not making sufficient

income from vegetables due to competition from cheaper imports from neighboring countries, despite the increases in domestic production. Farmers talked about these things indifferently when I asked. People did not seem to worry seriously about agricultural income as the Kurdish government continues to provide free wheat to all the residents, and if necessary, people can work with the Kurdish regional army to earn a cash income. Or perhaps this lack of concern may be down to the enduring quality of the Kurdish people who have lived through degrees of suffering that we have never experienced. They don't seem to even care and seem to be thinking "this level of difficulty is nothing."

There are more than 25 million Kurdish people in the world, however they don't have their own nation. Throughout history they have been consistently oppressed and have endured enormous hardships. Even under their current difficult situations and despite the precedents of history, the Kurdish people received us cheerfully and welcomed us warmly. I could see ancient ruins and scenically beautiful areas in different parts of the Kurdish area and could also sample local food including delicious shawarma. Shawarma is a local dish involving thinly sliced meat seasoned with hot spices placed on a turning spit, and when cooked the outer parts are cut off and eaten with bread. I hope that the security situation in Iraq will improve and we will be able to walk around the country freely for sightseeing. Incidentally, perhaps it is the oil power, but I was a little surprised to see that there were many migrant laborers along with the Kurdish workers as is the case in the Gulf states. They came from the Philippines, Sri Lanka and probably from India. I was wondering why everything could not be done by Kurdish workers.

(July 2011 by Yoshihisa Zaitso)



Vegetable cultivation by furrow irrigation

Vegetable and fruits cultivation in the mountain region



Erbil city center

Shawarma shop in town



*Note: In this article, the "Kurdish area" is limited to the three autonomous prefectures that were visited by the author.