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In Iraqi Kurdistan, sympathy for the PKK abounds

By Bobby Caina Calvan | McClatchy Newspapers

QALADIZA, Iraq – Near the edge of this dust-colored mountain village, a man dressed in military fatigues, his AK-47 casually lying near his feet and a grenade dangling from his waist, keeps sentry along a dry, rock-strewn creek bed.

The trail is a well-known route for smugglers, and they pass by frequently, crossing between Iraq and neighboring Iran, a steady procession of donkeys hauling food, fuel canisters and boxes filled with who knows what.

As each smuggler passes, the sentry stretches out his hand and the smuggler pays, sometimes a dollar's worth of Iranian tumans, sometimes \$5 worth.

The sentry identifies himself as a member of the Kurdistan Workers' Party, the PKK, the rebel group that has inflamed Turkish anger with attacks that have killed 30 Turkish soldiers in the last month. The U.S. State Department has included the group on its terrorist list for years.

The sentry, however, is hardly in hiding. He's in plain view of a checkpoint atop a nearby bluff, manned by a member of the peshmerga, the regional militia of the Kurdish Regional Government, the U.S.-allied rulers of northern Iraq.

That PKK guerrillas operate under the nose of the peshmerga angers Turkish officials, who say the Kurdish Regional Government inside Iraq has done nothing to prevent the rebels from launching attacks

from northern Iraq that have killed thousands of Turks. Last month, Turkey's parliament authorized its military to enter Iraq to confront the PKK.

Iraqi officials have pledged to crack down on PKK activities and U.S. officials have launched a diplomatic offensive to persuade Turkish officials not to invade. On Sunday, U.S. officials served as the go-between in the release of eight Turkish soldiers who'd been captured by the PKK and on Monday, President Bush will meet in Washington with Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan in what may be the last best hope of heading off Turkish military action.

But Turkish officials have expressed skepticism that the U.S. and Iraq are sincere in their pledges to disband the PKK or its sister organization, PEJAK, which launches attacks inside Iran. The PKK sentry said there's no difference between his group and PEJAK, the initials for Party for a Free Life in Kurdistan.

"We are the same. We are fighting for the same purpose," said the sentry here. Ordinarily, he said, PEJAK mans this location. The man refused to give his name and wouldn't permit photographs.

Days of traveling throughout northern Iraq show that the PKK can count on widespread support from local residents, despite recent official statements from the region's two dominant political parties that "we do not support the PKK, or allow any assistance to be

provided to them."

By most accounts, the guerrillas of the PKK and PEJAK are allowed to roam freely in Iraq's Kandil Mountains, a seemingly impenetrable terrain of jagged spires that is believed to be a safe haven and training ground for thousands of Kurdish fighters. Neither the peshmerga nor Iraq's national military have moved to root out the guerrillas. The United States has expressed no willingness to do so either.

Expressions of sympathy are frequent. Few here see the PKK as a terrorist group.

"There is nothing more important than realizing a dream of a united Kurdistan," said Kader Hama Amin, a peshmerga fighter whose home overlooks the trail in Qaladiza as it disappears into Iran. "It's the right of any people to have their own homeland."

"The PKK, they are innocent. They are just sitting in the mountains," said Hassan Ali, who was born in Qaladiza and drives a taxi between nearby Raniyah and Sulaimaniyah, 50 miles away.

Many blame Turkey for the tensions.

"They think they still have the Turkish Empire," said Reband Ahmed, a jail clerk in Raniyah, a gateway into the Kandil Mountains and rebel camps. The jail is reserved for petty criminals, he said, adding that there are no PKK fighters to be captured in town.

Going after the PKK is unrealistic, said a peshmerga major general, Osman Mohamed Amin.

"The border is very long, and

the Iraqi government is weak," Amin said. "If Turkey, with its army and its weapons, can't take control of those mountains, how can anyone expect us to do it? We would like to stop them, but we're not strong enough to stop them," he said.

As a peshmerga fighter, Amin has battled the PKK during years of internal strife in Kurdistan. Friends and family died in the fighting, he said. Would he battle them again? He doesn't relish it. "It would be Kurd against Kurd," he said. "We don't want any more bloodshed."

Two weeks ago, Amin fled to Raniyah after Turkish aircraft began circling above the villages in Peshtashan, a frequent target of Iranian shelling and now viewed with suspicion by the Turks.

"They are targeting our villages because they think the villagers are helping" the guerrillas, he said.

Sometimes by the handful, sometimes by the hundreds, PKK fighters descend into the villages, Amin said.

"It happens sometimes when they come into the villages and ask for food and other help," Amin said. Villagers extend their hospitality willingly, he said. Sometimes the rebels collect taxes. They erect checkpoints along mountain passes, where they collect tolls.

"We haven't had anybody complain about taxes," Amin said. "People are doing it just to help them out. And when they help, it's only a small amount. It's not as much as you think."