

2003: The year that was for Riemke and Maarten

Back at base

A little unexpectedly, we returned to The Hague at the end of this year. Maarten's position in Tehran ceased to exist for a number of reasons. The most important one was the lack of progress of the business development projects that Shell is pursuing in Iran. Besides, Shell's exploration and production business reorganised, so that there is now only one operating company in each geographical area of the world. As a result there was no longer a justification to have an expatriate HSE manager in Iran.

For a short time it appeared that Maarten was going to do environment for the regional operating company that is covering the Middle East and the former Soviet Union. However, HSE appeared to have gotten little attention in the formation of this company and the job was supposed to be carried out on a part-time basis. This in itself would have been a big challenge, given the geographical spread of activities (from Libya to Sakhalin) and because of the great number of joint-ventures with national oil companies in the Middle-East, which makes it difficult to enforce a standardised approach. Physically it would also have been very difficult to do the regional work out of Tehran, in part because in Iran there is no access to the information and communication network of Shell. This is because of the United States' trade sanctions against Iran.

Instead, Maarten has gone back to the central HSE department of Shell's exploration and production sector, where he also was before we left for Abu Dhabi in 1997. Although we regret that we had to leave Tehran after only a year and a half, we are pleased that this time we are going back to the Netherlands for good. Effectively we have been abroad for six years now and it was time to get closer to our families and pick up our social life in the Netherlands again.

Iran: an abject regime

Of course, with the war in Iraq we look back on a very thrilling year. Although the embassies and Shell reviewed and updated the emergency and evacuation plans, nobody really thought that there would be any real danger in Tehran. And there was not.

In the course of the year there have been a number of developments that have put Iran in the limelight. There were large student demonstrations in May and in the follow-up a Canadian-Iranian photo-journalist was arrested and subsequently died as a result of injuries inflicted during interrogation. This put the human rights situation in Iran on the international agenda again and the award of the Nobel peace prize to Mrs Shirin Ebadi provided some extra ammunition.

We were more closely involved ourselves, as a friend of ours attended the human rights dialogue between the European Union and Iran as an academic observer. Also through our contacts with the Dutch embassy we obtained a great deal of background information on things happening in Iran. Life for Iranian dissidents is very uncomfortable.

Later in the year the issue of Iranian nuclear technology surfaced. Eventually this resulted in an agreement between the Iranian government, the big members of the European Union and the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA). Iran has (temporarily) suspended the enrichment of uranium and has submitted to the IAEA a report of all the activities that Iran has secretly developed over the last twenty years. Iran has therefore systematically breached the Non-Proliferation Treaty since the Islamic revolution.

The report that the Director-General of the IAEA submitted to the board at the end of November, showed among other things that Iran declared to the IAEA 12 of in total 22 nuclear installations only in 2003. One of those was a pilot plant for the enrichment of uranium that already had been partially dismantled again.

This issue only came to light because Iranian dissident groups outside of Iran had signalled the existence of secret nuclear installations in the country. After that it has been a number of months before Iran decided to co-operate actively with the IAEA. In November, the IAEA board (naturally) condemned Iran for flagrant breaches of the Non-Proliferation Treaty but stopped short of recommending to the Security Council that sanctions be taken against the country.

The regime in Iran is abject and cannot be trusted. And it remains to be seen if the changed position of Iran towards the IAEA will be maintained. After all, countries need to give only three months notice to withdraw from the Non-Proliferation Treaty.

Iran: nice people; beautiful country

It is of course a pity that all those nice Iranians have to live with this regime, because they are a very friendly people. We have met a fair number of Iranians and almost always these encounters were very enjoyable. For us this was a big difference from living in Abu Dhabi, where we did not meet the local population socially at all.

The problem remains that the political situation in Iran does not move and that the conservatives pull all the strings. The majority of the Iranians no longer believe in gradual reform. Voter turnout for the municipal elections this year was lower than 20 per cent and it is not expected that this will be higher for the parliamentary elections next year.

Riemke's sister and brother-in-law were visiting us in April and with them we visited a number of touristic highlights. Of course we went again to Isfahan, where the mood was more relaxed than in November of last year when we were there during Ramadan. Now all the teahouses were open and we met Iranian gentlemen, who cited the great Persian poets to us. We also visited Shiraz and Persepolis and later Kerman and Bam.

Shiraz is a pleasant medium sized city, very different from Isfahan. It has a beautiful botanic garden and a number of beautiful palaces and historic buildings. Persepolis is some 30 kilometres outside Shiraz and it is very impressive, although a lot smaller than we thought. Close by are a number of tombs, including those of Cyrus, Xerxes and Artaxerxes. We read about the Persian Wars while doing Greek at grammar school and it is fascinating to stand before their actual graves.

Kerman is very small and provincial after Isfahan and Shiraz. By that time we had already seen so many mosques that we could not muster much enthusiasm any longer. However, the bazaar of Kerman was very worthwhile, especially because of the underground bath and teahouses. Bam is some 100 km away. It is an old citadel, a walled city with a castle towering above it, and entirely built of mudbrick. Until approximately 80 years ago the citadel was in normal use. Very impressive.

Bam is seriously derelict, but restoration has started. Lack of maintenance is a general problem of all historic buildings and monuments in Iran; heritage clearly had no priority following the revolution and it is only now that one discovers that the country is losing its tourist attractions.

Earlier in the year we went for a weekend to the Caspian Sea and to the city of Ramsar (of wetlands convention fame). Ramsar has been built in the beginning of the previous century and was at that time a beautiful, monumental spa with a glorious avenue leading from the Ramsar hotel to the sea. That beauty is clearly fading. We found it striking that there was so little public access to the Caspian Sea. Most of the coastline has been built up.

The palaces and houses of the former Shah of Persia are very interesting. Many of them are open to the public, for instance the summer palace in northern Tehran and a villa in Ramsar. Many rooms have been left in their original state with the furniture of the royal family. In the dining rooms the table has been laid with the royal plates and cutlery. Almost everything is a token of wealth and poor taste. We visited a villa that had belonged to the Shah's elder sister

and that was built in concrete in the form of a snail's shell in the 1960s. The interior and the furniture had been specifically designed for the house but were no less horrible for that.

Work and play

Maarten was this year engaged in a development project that a Japanese consortium is working on together with Shell. The project aims to develop a large oilfield in the south-west of Iran on the border with Iraq.

He has been there a number of times, but the field itself is in a military area, a legacy of the Iraq-Iran war of the 1980s. The field is close to the remainder of a marshland that forms part of a gigantic marshland area in the south of Iraq (fed by the Euphrates and the Tigris rivers) and in the border area between Iran and Iraq (fed by the Tigris river and by the Karke river in Iran). Of the original wetland perhaps ten per cent remains. It has been drained by the Iraqi regime to punish the local population, which in 1991 revolted against Saddam Hussein following the Gulf War.

Although there should have been an agreement between the Japanese and Iran in June, that did not materialise. Then the nuclear developments provided additional reasons for delay. Now an outcome is expected by Iranian New Year (March 2004). But even then it will not be sure that conditions will be sufficiently attractive for Shell to take part in the project.

Two other projects that Shell was working on, met their demise this year. One was a proposal for a middle distillates synthesis plant that would run on natural gas from the South Pars field that is shared between Iran and Qatar. As the Qatari were able to decide more quickly and offer better conditions, Shell decided to go to Qatar first. The other project was a petrochemicals plant in Bandar Iman Khomeini (on the northern Persian Gulf coast), on which the (Iranian) National Petrochemical Company and Shell could not eventually come to an agreement.

Because of the disappearance of these projects, there was little work left for Maarten, as it was his job to ensure that HSE would be dealt with equably in all projects.

This year Riemke worked for three months for the Dutch agricultural attache. She was standing in for the assistant, who was on maternity leave. She really enjoyed this and it also led to more and better contacts with the embassy people.

We very much enjoyed our social life in Tehran. Before we went on leave in March, we had over 40 people in our apartment for a very animated party. The initiative to have a Dutch evening once a month clearly filled a need, because there were always plenty of people there. Just before we left, we said hello to the new Dutch ambassador and his wife, to whom we had said good-bye when they left Abu Dhabi for South Korea in 1998.

In short, we were sorry to have to leave Iran.

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