Eric Stover, director of the Human Rights Center and adjunct professor of public health, left the tranquility of the Berkeley campus to travel to war-ravaged Iraq earlier this year.

Working with Human Rights Watch, the largest U.S.-based human rights organization, Stover remained in Iraq for five weeks in March and April to monitor possible violations of the Geneva Conventions on all sides of the conflict and to identify human rights disasters in the making.

Stover and Hania Mufti, the London director for the Middle East and Northern Africa division of Human Rights Watch, spent much of their time interviewing displaced people and documenting human rights abuses. Among those interviewed were 35 Iraqi soldiers who had deserted their units and fled into Kurdish-controlled areas. The soldiers reported extremely low pay (approximately U.S. $2 a month) and meager food rations in their units. “Some days we were so hungry we would eat grass which we mixed with a little water,” said a 21-year-old soldier from Baghdad. Some of the soldiers described inhumane punishments, including beatings, and said that officers frequently threatened them with execution if they tried to escape. The officers carried out their threats: one soldier gave an eyewitness account of the execution of 10 suspected deserters.

Early in their investigation, Stover and Mufti warned of a situation ready to explode into violence in Kirkuk, Iraq’s third largest city with about 500,000 people. The city is at the center of long-simmering ethnic tensions. From 1991 through 2002, an estimated 120,000 Kurds, Turkomans, and Assyrians were driven out of Kirkuk by Hussein’s forces in order to gain control of the oil-rich region, which was resettled with Arab families. “Imagine what Kurds and other displaced ethnic groups would do if they returned to find a resettled family in the homes they were forced to leave,” said Stover.

Following the withdrawal of Iraqi forces from Kirkuk on April 10, Stover and Mufti’s predictions became reality. Many Arabs were forcibly expelled from their homes, and widespread looting and destruction of property affected all the city’s ethnic groups. Human Rights Watch reported that at least 40 civilians were killed in Kirkuk within five days’ time. The organization issued a press release stating, “U.S. and coalition forces have failed to bring law and order to Kirkuk and ensure the security of civilians, and therefore [they] contravene the Geneva Convention provisions specifying the obligations of an occupying power.” Human Rights Watch called upon the U.S. and interim Iraqi authorities to take immediate steps to establish mechanisms to settle claims over disputed property and other assets.

This was not Stover’s first visit to Iraq. In 1991, he led a delegation of forensic scientists to Iraq to assist the Kurdish government in the investigation of Kurds who had disappeared under Saddam Hussein’s brutal Anfal campaign of forced relocation in the late 1980s. Some tens of thousands of Kurds were reportedly killed by the Iraqi government after they were driven out of their land. In 1992, Stover testified before Congress about the mass killings in Iraq. Stover’s work in the field of human rights over the past two decades has taken him to other areas of conflict. As former executive director of Physicians for Human Rights, he investigated mass graves in Bosnia in the 1990s while serving as an “Expert on Mission” for the International Crime Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia in The Hague. He has also investigated violations of human rights in Rwanda, Argentina, the Philippines, Chile, Mexico, South Africa, Cambodia, and Guatemala.