

Iraq's first post-Saddam film is metaphor for Kurdistan's 'rape'

'Turtles Can Fly' depicts reality through the most innocent of bystanders

TOKYO: Taking his camera to Iraq to make the first film since Saddam Hussein's fall, acclaimed Kurdish filmmaker Bahman Ghobadi believes he has found the most objective witnesses to war: children.

The director, who hails from an Iranian Kurdish village bombed out in the Iran-Iraq war, insists his latest work, "Turtles Can Fly," is not ideological, instead depicting reality through the most innocent of bystanders.

But there is no mistaking the meaning of the film's young heroine, who cares for a baby born after she was raped by an Iraqi soldier.

"I can say that my film is a symbolic one. The girl plays someone who was raped and has a baby," Ghobadi said on a visit to Tokyo ahead of the film's release in Japan. "My country, Kurdistan, which lies over Iran, Iraq, Syria and Turkey, has been raped by many countries like the girl in the film. We must not let it happen anymore," the rising cinema star said in his soft but husky voice.

"Turtles Can Fly" is the third movie by Ghobadi, who in 2000 won the prestigious Camera d'Or at Cannes, awarded for the best first feature, for another film about Kurdish children, "A Time for Drunken Horses."

Ghobadi, 37, went for his latest work to a village much like his hometown - though not in Iran but Iraq. He filmed in the spring 2003, just as Saddam's regime was collapsing amid a U.S.-led invasion largely supported by Kurds.

Instead of going to Iraq with his own actors, Ghobadi recruited Kurdish children and said he treated them as if they were family, building in them the confidence to

appear before his lens.

The movie opens dramatically with the desperate stare into the camera of a young Kurdish girl who then leaps from a cliff. The story comes to explain how she has reached this breaking point, going back to her time in a refugee camp.

The children in "Turtles Can Fly" show scars of conflict both big and small. Many are missing fingers. The heroine, Agrin, was raped. And they live off petty change they earn digging up landmines and selling them to the UN.

Such bleakness could have befallen Ghobadi himself. Raised in an Iranian Kurdish village blown to pieces in the 1980-88 war with Iraq, Ghoba-

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di trained to become a champion wrestler after his father tried to find a way for him to escape the cycle of rootlessness and drugs plaguing Kurdish youth.

Through his wrestling, he by chance encountered photography. And again by chance he was taken under the wing of Abbas Kiarostami, the doyen of Iranian cinema, who hired him as an assistant for a film shot in Kurdistan.

Despite the desolation of his characters, Ghobadi looks calm and serene, an outlook he attributes to his time with Kurdish children.

"Although they have much more severe lives than I do, they have laughter in their daily lives. They fill me with energy and passion. Their smiles are shining and are the best in the world," he said.

And in Ghobadi's view, the

children can tell a story better than an outright political narrative could. While the film is set against the backdrop of the U.S.-led invasion, Ghobadi offers a diversity of approaches to the conflict.

One boy, nicknamed Satellite, goes to work installing television dishes so the Kurds can learn about the war. He relishes the prospect of an American overthrow of Saddam. The elders, jaded after so many broken promises to the Kurds, are more skeptical.

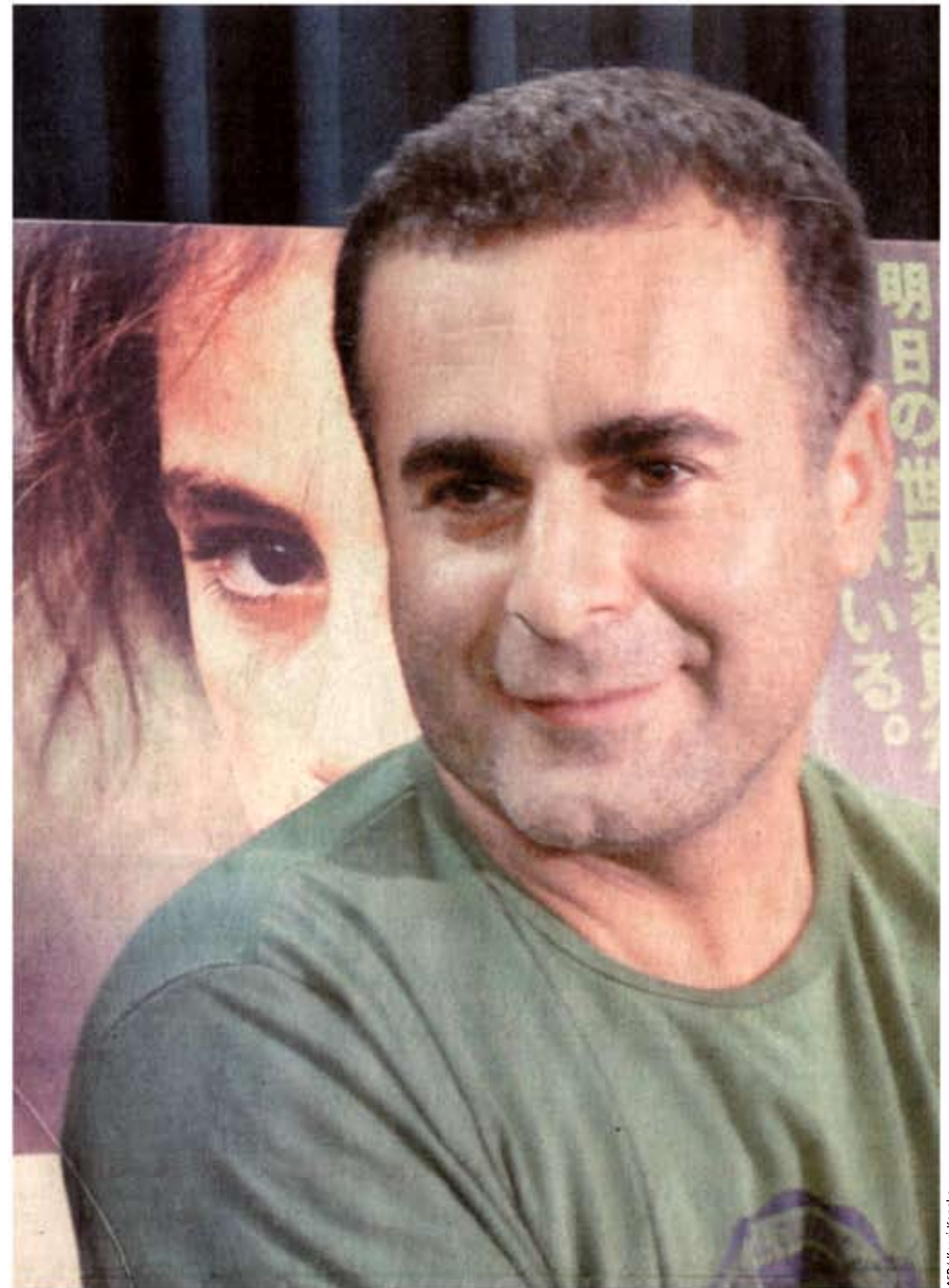
"My films can never be political," Ghobadi said. "They depict the reality of children's lives." With an estimated 30 million people, the Kurds are considered the world's largest ethnic group without their own state. They have been put down and their culture silenced by all the other nations that divide up their mountainous swath of land.

Kiyoshi Nakagawa, a researcher on Kurdistan and an instructor at Japan's Osaka Sangyo University, said that Ghobadi's growing fame had the power to stir up more attention about the Kurds.

He noted a subtle political element in "Turtles Can Fly." An Iranian Kurd made a film about Iraqi Kurds, proving how Kurdish culture transcends national borders.

"The Kurdish people in Iraq have been ignored for a long time internationally. The film has put a spotlight on the victims, the Kurds of Iraq, both under Saddam's dictatorship and during the U.S. operation," Nakagawa said. - AFP

"Turtles Can Fly" screens in Lebanon tonight at Beirut's **Medina Theater** on Hamra Street as part of the film festival **"Civil Violence and War Memories: Here and Elsewhere."**



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AFP/Kaori Kaneko