



Kuwait's Emir Sheikh Jaber al-Ahmed al-Sabah kisses the ground at Kuwait City's international airport. The emir returned to the war-wrecked country yesterday after seven months of exile in Saudi Arabia.

Kuwait's ruler returns from exile

Emir set to deal with rebuilding, political turmoil

By EDITH M. LEDERER
Associated Press Writer

KUWAIT CITY — Kuwait's ruler flew home yesterday after seven months in exile and kissed the ground of his once-prosperous nation, wrecked by Iraq in his absence.

It was a relatively low-key homecoming for the emir, Sheikh Jaber al-Ahmed al-Sabah, with a minimum of ceremony and a small show of public adulation. He has been criticized by some Kuwaitis for waiting so long to return.

The 64-year-old monarch, one of the world's wealthiest men and married dozens of times, arrived from Saudi Arabia on a Kuwait Airways jet named Bubiyan. It was named after the Kuwaiti island that Iraqi President Saddam Hussein had demanded before his Aug. 2 invasion of Kuwait.

As Sheikh Jaber emerged from the blue and white jet, he stood on the top of the stairs with his hands over his eyes. Some observers thought they saw tears.

When he stepped onto Kuwaiti soil, the emir knelt and kissed the ground. The black braided band holding his white headress, called a keffiyeh, flopped onto the tarmac.

"This is the completion. This is the final stage," said Minister of Planning Sulaiman Mutawa, referring to the United Nations' resolution calling for the restoration of Kuwait's legitimate government.

Cabinet members, diplomats and friends applauded when the emir appeared, and mobbed him as he walked toward a VIP tent, set up in front of an airport building burned by the Iraqis.

In the distance, black smoke rose in the sky from several of the more than 500 oil wells torched by Iraq.

In Kuwait, the emir's plane arrived at 4:40 p.m., 40 minutes late. A military band from the six-nation Gulf Cooperation Council played the Kuwaiti national anthem.

A Bedouin dance group brandished swords and performed in front of the emir's motorcade. There were no speeches.

"I said, 'Congratulations. Welcome home,'" U.S. Ambassador Edward Gnehm said. "He said, 'It's wonderful to be home.'"

"He was moved," British Ambassador Michael Westin said.

There were no fireworks, no massive crowds.

On the ride from the airport into Kuwait City, a half-dozen American GIs stood by the side of the road waving Kuwaiti flags. Small clusters of Kuwaitis did the same.

Arabian Gulf Road, along the city's coast, was packed with car-tooting celebrants, but that has been the case every evening since liberation.

Mutawa had some difficulty explaining the muted response to the emir's return.

"They will be coming tomorrow and the day after," he said. "I say don't look for any significance in the appearance or the disappearance of people from the streets today."

The emir arrived as Kuwait faces a mammoth rebuilding job. His own palace was ruined by the Iraqi invaders; he is staying in a house in the suburban al-Nuzha district owned by a Kuwaiti family.



Kuwait's Emir Sheikh Jaber al-Ahmed al-Sabah gestures to well-wishers as he is escorted by Kuwaiti soldiers. The emir arrived back in Kuwait yesterday.

He also will have to deal with an increasingly restless and dissatisfied population.

Opposition activists are demanding democratic reforms and a return of the parliament the emir suspended in 1986.

Mutawa said Kuwaitis have "every right to feel frustrated" by the delays in restoring water, power and adequate food, but added that these are not problems the emir will be tackling.

"The recovery is in the hands of the government and the head of state is not involved," he said.

He said the emir will try "to pay condolences to those who lost their loved

ones, those who got their daughters raped, who had their husbands tortured. In a village community, this is how we behave. ... We just like one another and this is how we move about."

The emir had been in exile in the Saudi resort town of Taif. He fled Kuwait unceremoniously last Aug. 2 just ahead of invading Iraqi troops.

Today, his country hardly looks the same.

Iraqis destroyed much of the country, and virtually all citizens, rich and poor, are spending long hours in lines waiting for fresh food, gasoline, water and cooking gas.

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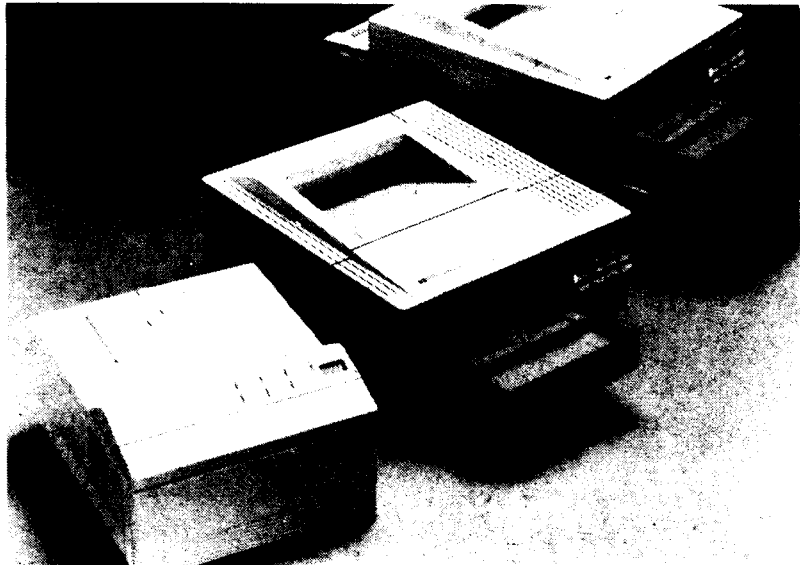
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