Inside the mind of the Israeli soldier
Linda Grant spends five days with the IDF

The Guardian 29.11.03
"My rape ordeal — in court Iceland's shame Kings Of Leon: hot, hairy. 40% Burchill"
POWER DRIVEN

In Iceland, work has already begun on a colossal $1bn dam which, when it opens in 2007, will cover a highland wilderness — and all to drive one US smelter. Environmentalists are furious, but the government appears determined to push through the project, whatever the cost. Susan De Muth investigates. Photographs by Robert Wallis
North of Vatnajökull, Europe's biggest glacier, lies Iceland's most fascinating and varied volcanic landscape, ice and boiling geothermal infernos meet at the edges of the glacier and then the largest remaining pristine wilderness in western Europe begins—a vast panorama of wild rivers, waterfalls, brooding mountains and many highland lakes thick with flowers.

A large part of this is due to disappear under 150m of water by 2006, when the Karahnjukar Dam is completed. Work has already begun on the 8.5km mega-project designed to power just one aluminum smelter, to be built by US multinational Alcoa. Environmentalists in Iceland and abroad have locked in disbelief as the project has proceeded, sidestepping one obstacle after another; driven by a government seemingly determined to push it through, whatever the cost to nature or the economy.

The 190m high, 730m wide main dam, two smaller saddle dams and 3.2km of headrace tunnels will be paid for by Landinvest (the national power company), owned jointly by the Icelandic government, the city of Reykjavik and the town of Akureyri. The main dam will create a huge reservoir, to be called Halslon, which will inundate a 576 sq km swath of the highlands to the south before rushing on to the glacier itself. The resulting hydroelectricity is contracted for sale for 50 years to Alcoa, which is constructing two smelters in the US and recruiting to Iceland as a cost-cutting measure.

In August 2003, Iceland's National Planning Agency (NPA) rejected the project on the grounds of "substantial irreversible negative environmental impact" of 126 hydro-power projects submitted for approval. Karahnjukar is the only one it has opposed. Just four months later, that decision was overturned by minister for the environment, Oddi Johannesson, in a move that prompted a series of lawsuits and raised concern about the future of democracy in Iceland. Earlier this year, lawyer Adil Olafsson and a group of 36 authors brought separate cases before the Icelandic high court and the European Free Trade Association's surveillance authority, challenging the government's lack of transparency and Oddi Johannesson's decision; both cases are expected to be heard next month.

I joined Gudmundur Poll Olafsson, Iceland's leading environmental activist, at Karahnjukar to see for myself what will be lost. A charismatic man in his early 50s, Olafsson was accompanied by his friends for the same "voluntary pilgrimage" undertaken by several thousand Icelanders this summer. We gathered on high ground overlooking the...
POWERS DRIVEN

Impact: The Blue Lagoon (right) is an accidental tourist success, as it was originally only an outflow for the geothermal power station in the background. But opponents of the new dam believe it will deter tourists. The Dynjaskar waterfall (below) is downstream from several existing hydropower projects and can be turned on and off. Friðrik Stefánsson (below, left) heads the national power company which is funding the dam; Guðmundur Pál Olafsson (below, right) is a key activist.

construction site. Bulldozers crawled across the scoured sides of Karahnjukar mountain, their distant rumble interspersed with birdsong. We could see the famous Dimmugljufur canyon, Iceland's Grand Canyon, which will be partially destroyed by the dam. The southern part has already been demolished and the northern stretch, carved by the river through time, will become dry. The dynamiting of the canyon began in March, some months before the final finance was in place, and was broadcast on state television.

"It was a propaganda tactic," says Olafsson. "The general elections were on May 5th and the government did not want Karahnjukar to be an issue. The message was, 'This is something you cannot stop.'"

Heading south from the site, the first part of our walk took us past Sandarfoss, a breathtaking terraced waterfall, one of 50 that will be lost. Last month, a farmer discovered a remains nearby of a farm where much of the action in Hrútafjöll's saga, one of the classics of Icelandic literature, took place; archaeologists heralded this as a very significant find. Crystal-clear waters tumbled into the grey-sky torrent of Jökulsá a Dal, the glacial river that will power the main dam, and from there one of the largest continuously regated areas in the highlands begins.

It was difficult to walk on the deep, springy mattress of moss, grass and flowers, and the spot is so inaccessible that few have been lucky enough to see it. This is one of the main breeding grounds for the area's reindeer — according to Snævall, a trainer, a cull of one third of the population has already begun in anticipation of the drastic reduction in feeding grounds. Thousands of pink-footed geese gather on the uplands, a protected nesting ground. It is also a favorite haunt of the snowy owl, ptarmigan and the majestic gyrfalcon. Blood-red rocky gorges, vivid as raw steak, give way to barren black sediment ledges. Moulded by glacial movement and sensitive to atmospheric changes, the formations are a record of 10,000 years of geological and climatic change. Unique in the world, they are of immense interest to scientists studying, among other things, global warming. Sensitivities fear there is not time to unlock even some of their secrets. Peering rapidly into unimaginable violence, we find the imposing stone head, sculpted by nature, which has become a symbol of resistance to the dam project; its image was this summer's top-selling postcard.

The environmental impact of the project is by no means confined to the future shores of Halslon, nor to unpopulated areas. In summer, when the water is low, strong waves which will whip up debris all at the edge of the reservoir, blowing dust storms over the highlands towards farms further east. The hydropower project will also divert Jökulsá a Dal at the main dam, hurling the river through tunnels into the slow-moving Jökulsá a Fjöllum, which feeds Iceland's longest lake, Ólafsvatn. The calm, silvery surface of this tourist attraction will become muddy, turbulent and unattractable.

In the Hrafnarfjöll, home to a significant seal population, heavy silt deposits from Jökulsá a Dal currently prevent the sea from encroaching on the land. Once the silt is trapped by the new dam, fields will be flooded and two established farms — one an eco-tourism centre — almost certainly destroyed.

The most alarming development for conservationists, however, is the violation of an officially protected area. One third of Krönljósarand at the foot...
of the glacier will be submerged. In a radio interview in August, Stjórnleðið said that, in his view, "protected" did not mean "ever protected." Frédrik Sophusson, Landvirkjun's managing director, supports his decision, and tells me the government "has the right to change such a human decision."

But many people fear that these statements herald hydro-power projects in areas that would otherwise have been unavailable. For example in Óðafoss, the most powerful waterfall in Europe, officially protected and one of Iceland's great tourist attractions. Professor Güni Thor Sigurðsson, who was part of a government think-tank consulted on proposed power projects, says, "Landvirkjun intends to divert Jökulsá a Fjöllum, cutting off the water to Óðafoss for most of the year but turning it on for the tourist season."

Gislason believes the government's determination to start the project was strategic. "It was the most controversial hydro-power plan on the table. The reasoning was that, if they could force Kárahnjukar through, they could get away with anything. It's already happening: in September, the minister for industry overrode an environmental impact assessment and gave the go-ahead for a project on the Thjórsá river that will inundate part of a protected area—a project that had already been rejected by the local authority."

Iceland is small—the population numbers around 250,000, and just 8 MPAs constitute its parliament. A handful of individuals and families, colloquially known as "the octopus," exerts disproportionate power and influence. Writer and social commentator Gudbergur Bergsson says, "Iceland is unique in being 80% middle class...the easiest class to control, because they have the most to lose."

There have been some grand gestures by individuals: this summer, poet and activist Elisabet Jóhansdottir grabbed the microphones during a domestic flight over Kárahnjukar, giving passengers an impassioned lecture on the dam project. But there is a lack of cohesion and strategy when it comes to wider protest. A small grassroots movement has regular "speak-outs" and demonstrations in Reykjavik, drawing up to 1,000 people, but islanders are genteel and peace-loving (Iceland has no military). Its protesters would struggle to orchestrate the kind of action and coordinated opposition that halted construction of the Santa Isabel dams in Brazil.

While much of the developed world is busy dismantling dams, transplanting its heavy industry base to the developing world, the people who govern Iceland hold fast to their dreams of an industrialised nation. Davíð Oddsson, the prime minister and leader of the Independence party, has been in power for 12 years and is revered, feared and hated in equal measure. With Fjallraven, leader of the Progressive party, he heads the ruling right-wing coalition. The opposition comprises a centre-left coalition with 30 seats, five Left-Greens and four Liberals.

Hydropower is officially the responsibility of the ministers for industry and environment, appointed in 1996, but many islanders doubt their ability to participate in informed debate on the relevant issues. Certainly their CIs are not reassuring: in charge at the ministry of industry and commerce is Valgurinn Sverris dóttir, whose only paper qualification seems to be an English as a foreign language certificate awarded in 1972. Stjórnleðið, minister for the environment, is a qualified physiotherapist.
Protests have become a symbol of resistance to the proposed aluminium smelter in Iceland's remote north. The smelter, which would be powered by the energy generated by the Kárahnjukar project, has been met with widespread opposition, with many local residents concerned about the environmental impact of the project.

**POWER DRIVEN**

The Kárahnjukar project is a massive hydroelectric development in northern Iceland, which is designed to power a proposed aluminium smelter. The project has been controversial, with many locals concerned about the environmental impact of the project.

**MONITORING**

The Aluminium Association of Iceland (AI) has been monitoring the project closely, and has expressed concern about potential environmental impacts. The association has called for a comprehensive environmental impact assessment before any further work is undertaken.

**PUBLIC OUTREACH**

The Aluminium Association of Iceland has also been involved in public outreach efforts to address concerns about the project. They have held public meetings and distributed information about the project to local communities.

**ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT**

The project is expected to have significant environmental impacts, including changes to local ecosystems and wildlife. The Aluminium Association of Iceland has called for a comprehensive environmental impact assessment before any further work is undertaken.

**FURTHER ACTION**

The Aluminium Association of Iceland is committed to ensuring that the project is developed in a way that is environmentally sustainable. They are working closely with local communities to address concerns and ensure that the project is developed in a way that is respectful of the local environment.
The cost: Thorsteinn Sigurðsson (right), a risk specialist, prepared a recent independent report on the dam. ‘It will never make a profit, and the Icelandic propensity for hydropower projects’ construction. It was also part of the consortium planning to build the Ross dam in Turkey which, had it gone ahead, would have made 30,000 Kurds homeless and drowned the world historic site of Hasankeyf.

When I asked Sigurðsson if he was aware of the corruption charges faced by Impregilo, he referred to an established culture of corruption in Africa and Asia as a “cost”. While he is not in a position to comment on Impregilo’s business practice, he was candid about Iceland’s past experiences. “Twenty years ago we had a dispute with a French company which is still going on,” he said. “It’s a bit of a bind here, but it’s a bit better to have paid.”

Asked about the procedures involved, Sigurðsson volunteered the information that, in the end, Impregilo’s was “the only serious bid remaining... and we were a little nervous about that.” He may have good reason to be nervous, too. Impregilo is the lowest bidder on the 500-megawatt project, and its contract includes a clause that gives Impregilo the right to terminate the contract if the project is not completed within three years.

Iceland’s economy is based on hydropower, and the government has been investing heavily in the country’s power plants. Sigurðsson’s report suggests that there is a need to reconsider the project’s viability, given the current economic climate.

In its report, the International Rivers Network (IRN) called on the government to halt the project until a thorough environmental impact assessment is conducted. The IRN is a global network of over 500 organizations that monitor and campaign against hydropower projects.

The report states that the project would have a negative impact on local communities and the environment, and that it would also lead to a loss of biodiversity.

Dr. Ragnar Sigurðsson, a senior consultant at the Icelandic government’s Environment and Energy Department, said that the project was not financially viable and that it would be better to use the money for other projects.

Friends of the Earth, who have been campaigning against the project for years, also expressed concern. “We are concerned about the project’s impact on the environment and the local community,” said a spokesperson.

The project has faced opposition from local communities, environmental groups, and international organizations, and it remains to be seen whether it will proceed.

The Guardian Weekly, November 29, 2003
What the war does to us
Since the intifada began, the Israeli army has been accused of war crimes, massacres and child murders. But among all the voices that have been raised, the ones that have been missing are those of the soldiers. Linda Grant was given exclusive, unrestricted access to a combat unit, and this is what she heard 16

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It was rejected by the National Planning Agency on the grounds of irreversible environmental damage, and conservationists argue it is not even viable. So why is an enormous dam project going ahead in Ireland? Susan De Muth reports 86

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