Iraq economic sanctions

Seven years of the most comprehensive sanctions in modern history have reduced Iraq and its people to utter destitution. United Nation Security Council's economic sanctions, invoked only ten times since the inception of the United Nations, and applied eight times since the end of the Cold War, constitute an extension of the devastating allied bombing campaign of 1991.

For the sixth time since January 1996, a delegation from Voices in the Wilderness, a campaign to end the U.S. supported UN economic sanctions against Iraq, traveled to Iraq in May 1997 in public violation of U.S. law. The delegation visited hospitals in Baghdad and the southern port city of Basrah. Members met with UN and relief officials, doctors, government workers, religious leaders, and Iraqis from all walks of life. Our findings of increasing suffering, death, and desperation throughout Iraq are confirmed by recent UN reports.

The UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) reported in December 1995, that more than one million Iraqis have died-567,000 of them children-as a direct consequence of economic sanctions. UNICEF reports that 4,500 children under the age of 5 are dying each month from hunger and disease. An April 1997 nutritional survey, carried out by UNICEF with the participation of the World Food Program (WFP) and Iraq's Minister of Health, indicated that in Central/Southern Iraq, 27.5 percent of Iraq’s 3 million children are now at risk of acute malnutrition.

To date, more children have died in Iraq than the combined toll of two atomic bombs on Japan and the ethnic cleansing of former Yugoslavia. The UN's Department of Humanitarian Affairs reports that Iraq’s public health services are nearing a total breakdown from a lack of basic medicines, life-saving drugs, and essential medical supplies. The lack of clean water-50 percent of all rural people have no access to potable water-and the collapse of waste water treatment facilities in most urban areas are contributing to the rapidly deteriorating state of public health.

Air borne and water borne diseases are on the rise, while deaths related to diarrheal diseases have tripled in an increasingly unhealthy environment. The World Health Organization (WHO) reports a six fold increase in the mortality rate for children under five, an explosive rise in the incidence of endemic infections, such as cholera and typhoid, and a markedly elevated incidence of measles, poliomyelitis, and tetanus. Malaria has reached epidemic levels. The WHO further states that the majority of Iraqis have subsisted on a semi-starvation diet for the past several years.

The use of Depleted Uranium (DU) during the Gulf War-a possible contributing factor to Gulf War Syndrome-may also be linked to increases in childhood cancers and leukemia, Hodgkin’s disease, lymphomas, and increases in congenital diseases and deformities in fetus, along with limb reductional abnormalities and increases in genetic abnormalities throughout Iraq.

The vaunted oil for food resolution (UN Resolution 986) is a failure-its promise of food and medicine having proved to be too little, too late. According to the WFP, by the end of May 1997, Iraq had exported 120 million barrels of oil and received 692,999 metric tons of food, 29 percent of what had been expected under the deal. Of the 574 contracts submitted to the Sanctions Committee for exports of humanitarian supplies to Iraq, 331 were approved, 191 placed on hold, 14 blocked, and 38 were awaiting clarification.

Of the $2 billion in Iraqi oil revenue authorized for a six month period, 30 percent is designated
for war reparations; 5 to 10 per cent for UN operations; 5 to 10 percent covers maintenance and repair of the oil pipeline; and 15 percent is earmarked for humanitarian supplies for the Kurdish population in Northern Iraq. About $800,000 is available for Central/Southern Iraq or approximately 25 cents per person per day for food and medicine.

Regardless, UN Resolution 986 does not provide for critically needed spare parts to repair Iraq's water, sanitation, and medical infrastructure, which was devastated during the Gulf War. Importing such basic items as chlorine, fertilizers, and pencils is prohibited.

Lacking spare parts and materials needed to repair and maintain their water and sewage treatment facilities, the condition of many Iraqis is scarcely improved by the food they receive. The untreated water is contributing to disease and death. Without hard currency, the economy of Iraq, estimated to have the second largest oil reserves in the world, has collapsed. Average public sector wages, for the few who have employment, have fallen to less than $5 a month, while hyperinflation has caused the price of goods to rise astronomically. The Iraqi dinar, worth $3 prior to sanctions, was worth $0.000625 in May. Skilled workers, including doctors and engineers, have deserted their jobs to become taxi drivers or to sell cigarettes. Iraqi professionals are leaving the country in increasing numbers. With an estimated 80 percent of Iraqis affected by the sanctions, families are selling household and personal possessions to purchase food and medicine. As the population struggles for survival, the social fabric of Iraq is disintegrating, as witnessed by the widespread rise in begging, street children, crime, and prostitution.

The people of Iraq have been on a roller coaster of hope and despair for seven years and seem to have settled on the rung of despair. Friar, the manager of a small hotel, asked us to go home and tell our government to bomb Iraq for 42 more days and get it over with for, she says, "We are all dying a slow and painful death under sanctions." A young doctor at a Baghdad hospital said, "Our life is over." Another doctor, who has practiced for 8 years and is forced to play God with the few available life-saving drugs, makes 3,000 dinar a month, or $2, while a bottle of milk for his children costs 3,500 dinar. He asks, "What does your country gain from our suffering?"

Children born since the Gulf War and hardly involved in the politics of sanctions, suffer in silence, often without access to pain killers, drugs, antibiotics, or hope. Some childhood cancers realized an 80 percent cure rate prior to sanctions. Now, without cancer fighting drugs, the survival rate for children with these same cancers is 0 percent.

The UN, chartered to protect civilian populations from the ravages of war, is instead engaged in a war of collective punishment, a war of mass destruction directed at the civilian population of Iraq. Considering the suffering and death in Iraq, the lack of public debate over the UN/U.S. participation in this massive violation of human rights is astonishing. The scourge of sanctions on the people of Iraq must come to an immediate and unqualified end.