

Albright's big lie: How the US has "protected" the Iraqi people

Bill Vann

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Some of the most stinging criticism of US policy at last week's "town meeting" in Columbus, Ohio concerned the impact of Washington's actions on Iraq's civilian population. There was particular anxiety that the planned bombardment of the country would result in a massive loss of life.

Secretary of State Madeleine Albright attempted to deflect such concerns by claiming that the blame for the suffering of the Iraqis lay entirely with the regime of Saddam Hussein. She declared that the US government had done everything in its power to safeguard the well being of the Iraqi people.

"I am willing to make a bet to anyone here that we care more about the Iraqi people than Saddam Hussein does," she said. "For the last seven years since the gulf war, he has starved his people. We have provided food. There is no limit on the amount of humanitarian assistance that can go in"

She went on to suggest that if women and children were killed in an American bombing campaign, it would be the result of the regime's "uncivilized" practice of leaving them in harm's way.

Albright's assertions were only a particularly crude example of the misinformation and lies which the government and the media have fed to the American people since the first gulf war. US officials invariably speak as though military attacks and economic sanctions are aimed against a single individual, Saddam Hussein. It is, apparently, to be assumed that the damage to life and limb caused by bombs and missiles, and the suffering and death resulting from lack of food, medicine and clean drinking water, are some sort of blessing to the Iraqi people in disguise.

An examination of US policy and its impact on the people of Iraq demonstrates the hypocrisy of Washington's humanitarian pretensions. Indeed, the Secretary of State has in the past been more forthright about the US attitude toward the conditions facing Iraq's population.

In a May 12, 1996 broadcast of the CBS news program "60 Minutes," Albright, then the US ambassador to the United Nations, was interviewed by Lesley Stahl. "We have

heard that half a million children have died," Stahl said. "That is more than died in Hiroshima. I mean, is the price worth it?" Albright replied without hesitation: "We think the price is worth it."

The scale of the human tragedy created by Washington's policy toward Iraq has been spelled out in a series of reports from United Nations relief agencies. Let us cite just a few of the accounts which have come out of Iraq in recent years.

UN documents death, starvation and disease

December 1995: "More than one million Iraqis have died—567,000 of them children—as a direct consequence of economic sanctions," the United Nation's Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) reported. It went on to state, "As many as 12 percent of the children surveyed in Baghdad are wasted, 28 percent stunted and 29 percent underweight."

March 1996: "Since the onset of sanctions, there has been a six-fold increase in the mortality rate for children under five, and the majority of the country's population has been on a semi-starvation diet," the World Health Organization (WHO) reported.

October 1996: UNICEF reported that "4,500 children under the age of 5 are dying each month from hunger and disease. The situation is disastrous for children. Many are living on the very margin of survival." This figure means the death of an Iraqi child every 10 minutes as a result of the US-imposed sanctions.

February 1997: Following a four-day trip to Iraq, WHO Director General Hiroshi Nakajima reported that, "Government drug warehouses and pharmacies have few stocks of medicines and medical supplies. The consequences of this situation are causing a near-breakdown of the health care system, which is reeling under the pressure of being deprived of medicine, other basic supplies and spare parts."

Medical missions to Iraq report that diseases like diabetes and cancers like leukemia, together with countless other illnesses, go untreated because insulin, cancer drugs and other medicines are simply not available. Meanwhile infectious diseases have reached epidemic proportions as a result of the destruction of Iraq's water and sanitation systems in the gulf war.

November 1997: UNICEF reported that nearly one million Iraqi children under the age of five are chronically malnourished. The agency's representative in Baghdad, Philippe Heffnick, declared, "What we are seeing is a dramatic deterioration in the nutritional well-being of Iraqi children since 1991' It is clear that the children are bearing the brunt of the current economic hardship." He added, "They must be protected from the impact of the sanctions. Otherwise, they will continue to suffer and that we cannot accept."

What of Albright's claim that the US is providing the Iraqi people with food and that an unlimited "amount of humanitarian assistance" is allowed into the country? This a bald-faced and rather transparent lie. If unlimited quantities of humanitarian relief were going into Iraq, how could these appalling conditions exist?

The humanitarian relief which reaches Iraq is pathetically inadequate and both its quality and quantity are subject to extreme limitations under the terms of the sanctions which the US and the UN are enforcing against the country.

The "oil for nothing" deal

What little assistance gets into Iraq is provided under UN Security Council Resolution 986/1111, the so-called oil-for-food deal, which allows Iraq to sell a limited amount of oil on the world market for supposedly humanitarian needs.

This provision is widely described in Iraq as the "oil for nothing" deal. Only 40 percent of the earnings from the oil sales can be spent on providing food and medicine to the poverty-stricken population of southern and central Iraq. The rest must go to pay for various UN operations, including the upkeep of the UNSCOM weapons inspectors whose provocations have brought Iraq once again to the brink of war.

According to UNICEF, the money provided under this arrangement would at best amount to just 25 cents a day for each Iraqi. The relief agency CARE reported last September that, "Children, mothers, the aged and sick were all well cared for before 1990, but are now dying while the outside world mistakenly believes it has solved Iraq's problems

with the much-delayed oil-for-food shipments." In reality, CARE continued, the deal "will barely keep the strongest of the population of Iraq on their feet."

In practice, the food and medicine provided under the arrangement have proven even more limited. The US, together with Britain, has systematically blocked contracts to ship humanitarian supplies to Iraq. Supplies have been stopped on a capricious and often irrational basis. In one case, a shipment of Angecet, a pill used by heart patients to stop chest pains and prevent fatal attacks, was blocked on the grounds that it contained nitroglycerin, an explosive. Presumably if Iraq extracted the ingredient from millions of such pills it could fashion a "weapon of mass destruction."

Recently the Security Council voted to allow a slight increase in Iraqi oil sales under the so-called humanitarian arrangement. Even if Washington and London cease their vindictive attempts to block the delivery of this aid, however, the catastrophic conditions prevailing in Iraq will not be alleviated by such measures. To put a stop to malnutrition and end the threat of famine, Iraq must rebuild its agricultural sector and its economy as a whole. To combat the multiple epidemics plaguing the country, it must repair its water and sewage systems and rebuild its hospitals. None of this is conceivable without the immediate lifting of the economic embargo and the infusion of massive economic resources.

That Washington is not about to support such an effort goes without saying. Albright is only one of the many administration officials who have declared that the US is determined to see that the sanctions against Iraq are never lifted, no matter what demands are met by the Iraqi regime. Within the UN Security Council, Washington has worked consistently to block any attempt to set a deadline for lifting the economic blockade.

These sanctions, a deliberate policy of crushing the Iraqi population by means of starvation and disease, constitute one of the great crimes against humanity this century.



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