

Eyewitness accounts from Iraq

## The toll of death and suffering from US-backed sanctions

Shannon Jones  
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Over 1,000 Iraqi-Americans attended a candlelight vigil in Southfield, Michigan February 5 to oppose US military action against Iraq. The event was sponsored by the Chaldean Archdiocese of America and was addressed by religious and community leaders.

Jacoub Mansour, president of the Chaldean Federation of America, an umbrella organization of groups representing some 100,000 Iraqi-Chaldeans living mainly in the Detroit metropolitan area, read a statement condemning both the threatened military action against Iraq and the continuing embargo. He stressed that the threatened bombing of Iraq would severely harm the Iraqi people, but would have virtually no effect on the Iraqi government.

In condemning the sanctions Mansour and others referred to estimates, recently published in the *Chicago Tribune*, that 500,000 Iraqi children have died since the end of the Persian Gulf war as a result of the US-led sanctions.

The keynote speaker, Bishop Thomas Gumbleton of Detroit, described the terrible impact of the UN embargo on the Iraqi people from personal observations made during a visit to Baghdad last September. Americans traveling to Iraq face severe intimidation by the US government. Before leaving they are warned that they can face fines of up to \$1 million and 12 years in prison. While the government has not yet sought to impose these penalties on anyone, their clear aim is to prevent any form of solidarity between the American and Iraqi people.

Gumbleton described the virtual destruction of the Iraqi infrastructure and the breakdown of such vital services as medicine. Doctors, he said, were unable to operate because of the lack of anesthesia and basic

medical supplies such as cotton and syringes. He reported that diseases related to malnutrition were rampant. He noted that there had been a recent surge in cancer deaths among young adults in Iraq, with doctors reporting an extraordinarily large number of cases of leukemia, and colon and rectal cancer. He said there was reason to believe that these cancer deaths were a product of the radioactive contamination produced by the thousands of US projectiles tipped with depleted uranium which were fired at Iraqi targets during the gulf war.

Gumbleton said what he saw in Iraq demonstrated the disregard for human life exhibited by the US and its allies in the gulf war bombing of Iraq and the continuing embargo. He estimated that some 100,000 to 200,000 Iraqi civilians had been killed in the course of saturation bombing. He described a visit to the air raid shelter in Baghdad destroyed by US bombs during the gulf war, one of the better-publicized US atrocities. Marks could still be seen on the walls where men, women and children were vaporized. Gumbleton described how he had spoken to an Iraqi woman who had lost nine children in the US air attack.

He said that UN officials in Iraq had explained to him how the United States and Britain had effectively blocked even the totally inadequate amounts of food and medicine provided to Iraq under United Nations Resolution 986. Under the complex set of regulations established by the UN to govern the sale of food and medicine to Iraq in exchange for oil, every contract has to be approved by a 16-member committee, including representatives of the US and Britain. These countries have veto power as permanent members of the Security Council.

The two governments have seen to it that only a trickle of supplies has reached Iraq. Gumbleton said that in the space of one week, for example, the US and Britain had vetoed 50 contracts for the purchase of food and medicine by Iraq. In one case the United States had rejected an order for powdered milk on the grounds that it might be used in chemical weapons experiments.

Gumbleton then read a letter from Jubrail Kassab, Chaldean Bishop in Basra, who described current conditions in his city:

"For seven years now the people of Iraq have been enduring tremendous difficulties and daily tragedies caused by lack of food, medicine and the basic necessities of life. The blockade imposed on us has harmed our people, depriving the poor of even plain bread and the simplest medicine.

"Basra, Iraq's second largest city, has no potable water supply. This is seven years after the war ended—no potable water supply and little electricity. Epidemics rage, taking away infants and the sick by the thousands. Those children who survive succumb to malnutrition, which stunts their physical and mental development. Our situation is unbearable. We appeal to people of conscience to work to end the blockade of Iraq.

"And let it be known that UN Resolution 986, the so called oil-for-food resolution, has served to divert world attention from the tragedy, while in fact in some respects it has even aggravated the tragedy. Since the summer of 1996 over \$2 billion worth of oil has been shipped, yet no more than a few kilograms of basic foods have trickled down to ordinary people, the equivalent of 12 cents per person per day. No medicine has arrived, yet humanitarian organizations have suspended deliveries of medicine, believing it will now be provided under Resolution 986."

After the meeting one Iraqi-American described the conditions in his native country as related by relatives and friends: "There is no clean drinking water. There are no working sewers. Kids play in sewer water and it makes them sick. They can't go to the hospital if there is an emergency.

"For example, it costs more than 100 dinars to buy one aspirin. That would be the same as for a worker making \$3,000 a month having to pay \$60 to buy one aspirin. People say, 'If you have to have surgery, you are dead.' If you are wealthy you can sell your house

and belongings and still go to the hospital if you feel like it.

"People are forced to sell things in order to provide food for their kids. They sell parts of their houses, like a door or a window. If they have a car they sell the parts. Every day it gets worse.

"There has not only been a decline in living conditions but in morals. Women are being forced to go into prostitution just to buy some food, because they are starving."



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