

United Nations maintains sanctions: Another vote to starve Iraq

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The unanimous decision of the United Nations Security Council April 27 to maintain economic sanctions on Iraq is a death sentence for tens of thousands of Iraqi people, the majority of them children, who will fall victim to malnutrition and preventable diseases in the coming months.

The vote came after a day-long meeting in which representatives of France, Russia, China and several other Security Council members questioned the embargo, but in the end bowed to the insistence from the United States, seconded by Great Britain, that the ban on trade remain in effect. US Ambassador Bill Richardson announced before the meeting that he would exercise the US veto against any move to lift the sanctions.

The only concession to Iraq was to speed up the review procedure, which will now be scheduled every 60 days instead of every six months. But none of the five permanent members with veto power—China, France, Russia, Britain and the US—is expected to propose any significant change in the embargo until the next full-scale report from the UN weapons inspectors in Iraq, due next October.

What is the price of six additional months of embargo, in human terms? According to UN figures, the death rate among Iraqi children has risen from 7,000 a year in 1989, the last full year before the embargo was imposed, to 57,000 in 1996. A six-month extension of the embargo thus means condemning to death 25,000 innocent children—most of them born long after the 1991 Persian Gulf war.

The staggering death toll in Iraq is the product of shortages of food, medicine, medical equipment and safe drinking water, which have contributed to a continuing epidemic of diseases like diarrhea, cholera, malaria, typhoid fever and aplastic anemia. Severe diet deficiency diseases, such as kwashiorkor and marasmus, rarely seen outside of the worst famine disasters like Ethiopia in the

1980s, have been frequently noted.

In addition, countless deaths have been caused by conditions like asthma and diabetes which are rarely fatal for children in even moderately advanced societies, but which kill in Iraq because of the lack of steroid inhalants, insulin and other ordinary medical supplies.

A war crime by the US and UN

UN figures shows that about 1 million Iraqi children under five years old are chronically malnourished, in a country which before the Persian Gulf war was able to finance large-scale food imports through its huge oil exports. The US government and its accomplices at the UN are guilty of the deliberate starvation of a civilian population, a war crime according to the rules applied at Nuremburg and subsequent tribunals.

US officials habitually refer to their support for a UN-run oil-for-food program under which Iraqi oil would be exported and sold and the proceeds turned over to the United Nations. The UN would use some of the funds to compensate Kuwaiti reparations claims against Iraq, and the rest to buy food and medical supplies.

The US only offered the oil-for-food plan after first determining that the Iraqi government would oppose such proposals as a violation of its sovereignty, since it would effectively cede control of Iraq's oil wealth, the principal national resource, to an agency that has worked to overthrow the Iraqi government. The proposal is thus intended only to provide a fig leaf for an American policy which has been aptly characterized as slow genocide.

When some of the Security Council representatives sought to raise the issue of Iraqi deaths, including the Chinese representative, Shen Guofeng, they were slapped

down by the US and Britain. Perhaps the most cynical and callous statement came from the British Ambassador to the United Nations, Sir John Weston, who warned against “shifting the focus from Iraqi compliance to Iraqi suffering.”

In fact, however, the vote came after considerable evidence of Iraqi compliance with UN weapons inspections had been presented to the Security Council. The International Atomic Energy Agency, which conducts inspections for nuclear weapons, reported that it had found no evidence of an Iraqi atomic weapons program during the past six months.

Even the report by UNSCOM, the UN agency which monitors chemical, biological and missile systems, admitted that Iraq has complied with demands for the inspection of the so-called presidential sites which were the pretext for the US threats of military action last February. All eight sites were inspected without restriction in late March and early April, and nothing was found.

Nonetheless UNSCOM chief Richard Butler declared that “no progress” had been made in the past six months in relation to Iraq. He claimed that UN inspectors had found several artillery shells filled with active mustard gas, although admitting that these shells had been identified by UN inspectors more than two years ago and did not represent any new Iraqi activity.

Interimperialist conflicts

The opposition to sanctions by China, Russia, France and other European imperialist powers, such as Italy, has little to do with sympathy for the Iraqi people. These governments are pursuing their own strategic and commercial interests in the Middle East, which are in conflict with those of the United States and Britain. French and Russian energy companies, for instance, have signed contracts with Iraq, cornering the bulk of Iraqi oil exports to the world market once the embargo is lifted. Russia also stands to reap billions in repayment of old military credits once Iraq begins to take in significant oil revenues.

The waning international support for the American policy towards Iraq was revealed in the February crisis, when US military strikes were averted by a last-minute agreement between UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan

and Saddam Hussein. The Clinton administration was not able, despite its efforts, to block Annan’s trip to Baghdad, and it was compelled to accept the agreement as at least a temporary end to the confrontation.

Press reports described the US and Britain as “isolated” and on the defensive in the latest Security Council deliberations. Even US Ambassador Richardson had to concede: “We in the United States acknowledge progress in areas like access to presidential and sensitive sites.”

At his press conference three days later, President Clinton suggested that Iraq might be judged to be in full compliance on nuclear weapons next October, although not in chemical and biological weapons. A proposal along those lines was made by France and Russia during the Security Council debate.

Clinton suggested vaguely that a transfer of some of the American military forces from the Persian Gulf might also be forthcoming, but set no timetable. This move arises out of the enormous cost of maintaining the huge US deployment in the region, including two aircraft carrier battle groups, 400 war planes, and 36,000 troops, which will amount to \$1.36 billion for the nine months ending in September.

The *Washington Post* reported that an ongoing Pentagon and administration strategy review on Iraq is considering a shift from threats of immediate military action to a warning of “disproportionate” US retaliation if Iraq uses chemical or biological weapons. Washington has not ruled out the use of nuclear weapons against Iraq.

The altered US strategy would include “public warnings to Iraq that sanctions will never be lifted until it demonstrates sustained compliance with weapons inspectors.” This amounts to the continuation of a policy aimed at the deliberate starvation of the Iraqi people.



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