

Detroit-area meeting hears eyewitness reports on impact of US-backed sanctions

"The people of Iraq are dying"

Shannon Jones
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The human toll of the United Nations embargo on Iraq is growing day by day. According to UNICEF, more than 1.1 million Iraqi children have died as a result of the sanctions, primarily from lack of food and medicine. Recent reports from Iraq indicate a deterioration of the situation, despite the so-called 'oil for food' agreement.

A delegation of 82 American citizens traveled to Iraq May 6-13 to deliver relief supplies. Their report back from the trip provides a grim account of life for millions of ordinary Iraqis suffering under the embargo.



Malnourished and dehydrated child in Basra, Iraq

The group, calling itself the 'Iraq Sanctions Challenge,' was headed by former US Attorney General Ramsey Clark and Detroit Catholic Bishop Thomas Gumbleton. It delivered \$4 million in medical supplies to hospitals in Baghdad, Mosul and Basra. The delegation visited a water treatment center, a food rationing warehouse, the University of Baghdad and primary and secondary schools. Those who participated did so in defiance of a US ban on travel to Iraq.

The trip received only perfunctory notice in the American press. In an effort to more widely publicize the delegation's findings, public meetings have been held in cities across the US. One such meeting was held in the Detroit suburb of Southfield, Michigan on June 17. Hosted by the National Association of Arab Chaldean Businesswomen (NAACB), the gathering was addressed by Bishop Gumbleton and several other members of the delegation. Predictably, no major media outlet covered the Southfield meeting.

The first speaker was Intissar Alkafaji, chairperson of the NAACB. She noted that the campaign against the

sanctions had to date aroused little support locally, despite the fact that the Detroit area is home to a large population of Iraqi immigrants. She attributed this in part to the refusal of the media to report on conditions in Iraq, and their attempt to portray opponents of the embargo as supporters of Iraqi dictator Sadaam Hussein.

Intissar praised Gumbleton and other delegates for their efforts to publicize the plight of Iraqi civilians. Alkafaji said she herself had spent two weeks in Iraq this past April visiting with relatives.

The next to speak, delegation member Lee Booth, told of the spread of radioactive material from weapons used by the US military during the Gulf war. She explained that in the wake of the war, Iraq, which previously had a relatively low cancer rate by world standards, had experienced an epidemic of cancer deaths.

Maria Mohammed, a Detroit teacher who visited Iraq as part of the delegation, described the collapse of the Iraqi education system under the impact of the embargo. 'Being a teacher I am very concerned about education. When I went to Iraq I saw students sitting two to a desk. They didn't have pencils or paper because of the sanctions. They had only a small supply of books. Iraqi children would love to have even a stub of a pencil or a little scrap of paper to write on.'

'It broke my heart to see the conditions under which the teachers are teaching and the students are learning. I came back to the US with a broken heart. This is hard for me to talk about.'

David Sole, president of the Sanitary Chemists and Technicians Association, UAW Local 2334 at the Detroit Water and Sewage Department, described his visit to the water treatment plant in Baghdad. He said that while in Iraq he became aware of the high incidence of dysentery and diarrhea among children.

'Why is there such a prevalence of diarrhea and

dysentery? I asked to tour the water facilities. I toured the April 7 treatment plant. One-half of the pumps are down. The sanctions prohibit the importation of pumps. Alum [used in water purification] is banned for import. Local alum is 50 percent impure. They have to clean out the tanks every day to remove the residue. Until one year ago Iraq was not allowed to bring in chlorine. There is so little chlorine they can't treat the water when it is first pumped in.

'The bombing destroyed the system of delivery pipes. Forty percent of the water leaks out before it reaches Iraqi homes. They are now serving two times as many people as before the war with one-half as many pumps. Contaminated groundwater is seeping back into the pipes. They do not have enough chlorine to adequately treat the water. Eleven percent of homes are getting contaminated water. Even if they had the medicine to treat the children, as soon as they were sent home they would drink contaminated water again.

'If they got enough chlorine they could perhaps eliminate one-half of the deaths they have now. They told us that Baghdad is 10 times better than any other city. I am assuming that in some cities there is no chlorination going on.

'Waste water is dumped directly into the Tigris River. Hospital incinerators are not functioning. Hospital wastes are being dumped directly into the Tigris. There is a massive ecological disaster waiting to happen.'

The final speaker was Bishop Gumbleton. Besides his recent visit as part of the delegation, Gumbleton traveled to Iraq last year in order to learn about the impact of the sanctions firsthand. 'I was not prepared for what I experienced on these trips to Iraq,' he said. 'I will only mention a couple of things that linger in my awareness after five weeks.'

'We visited a hospital in Basra and visited wards where we saw many children dying. There was this tiny baby, two and a half to three months, swollen, malnourished, lying on a bed without sheets, in the heat. The hospital could not keep the air conditioning going because of lack of electricity. Flies were in the room. The child was in extreme suffering, its eyes glazed over. The doctor said, 'That baby will be dead before the day is over,' and it was true.

'We visited Basra, the area where the worst of the radioactive contamination took place, the area where the worst of the bombing took place--carpet bombing that devastated whole areas. Basra has no potable water supply. They have not been able to rebuild anything. They

take contaminated water directly from the Tigris.'

Following Gumbleton's presentation, this reporter asked him to compare the conditions in Iraq on his first visit to those of the most recent trip.

He replied: 'A greater number of people are on the streets begging. More and more people have to sell what property they have. More people are having to sell homes and cars. There is more discouragement on the part of doctors. They feel they are at the end of their rope. Many people are giving up and not wanting to struggle any longer.'

Gumbleton said the only major report of their visit in the American press was in the *San Jose Mercury* three weeks before.

The WSWs also spoke to Intissar Alkafaji. 'I went to Iraq in April. I was not able to go outside Baghdad. Everyone is devastated. People that I used to know who were well-to-do are now the poorest of the poor.

'My own brother had kidney failure. We were lucky we were able to bring him back. Other people are not so fortunate. That is just one out of how many millions? The rest of the people are dying.

'I was there in 1993 and it wasn't as bad. People were suffering, but it wasn't as bad. It is much worse now.

'The thing that broke my heart was the children. Children 12 and 13 years of age are not attending school. That really broke my heart, thinking, 'These people are going to grow up uneducated.' That aside from the people dying, the lack of good water, the lack of medicine and the lack of everything else.

'I met a doctor over there who was working as a taxi driver because all he was earning was 3,000 dinars. You cannot buy two dozen eggs for 3,000 dinars. It's like \$3. The currency is so devalued you can't buy anything. So you have doctors working two and three jobs just to maintain support. Every person in the family is working. It didn't used to be like that.

'People are suffering. Everywhere you go, you come back really, really depressed.'

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