

UN oil for food coordinator denounces Iraq sanctions

Shannon Jones
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The outgoing United Nations coordinator of the so-called oil for food program in Iraq has denounced the ongoing trade sanctions that have resulted in the deaths of hundreds of thousands of men, women and children.

Denis Halliday, head of UN humanitarian operations in Iraq, resigned his post effective last week. He announced his intention to resign last July, citing personal opposition to the economic blockade. Halliday managed the oil for food program for 13 months and prior to that had been with the UN for 30 years.

On October 6 he told a briefing in Washington, DC, organized by the Arab-American Institute and the American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee, that UN estimates of 5,000 to 6,000 Iraqi children dying every month were 'probably modest.' 'The death of one Iraqi child attributable to economic sanctions is one death too many. Unfortunately, we are faced with thousands,' Halliday said. 'It is unnecessary and unacceptable to allow this human tragedy to continue.'

In earlier comments to the Reuters news agency Halliday called sanctions 'a totally bankrupt concept.' He said the trade embargo violated the UN charter and UN conventions on human rights. 'There is an awful incompatibility here, which I can't quite deal with myself. I just note that I feel extremely uncomfortable flying the UN flag, being part of the UN system here,' he said.

Halliday noted the '4,000 to 5,000 children dying unnecessarily every month due to the impact of sanctions, because of the breakdown of water and sanitation, inadequate diet and the bad internal health situation.' He said the sanctions were impacting Iraqi society in many ways. Effects include the breakdown of family life, an increase in crime and the number of street children.

He warned of the danger of a turn by Iraqi youth to

Islamic fundamentalism. Comparing the developing situation in Iraq to that in Afghanistan, where a militant fundamentalist faction has taken power, he said, 'It is not well understood as a possible spin-off of the sanctions regime. We are pushing people to take extreme positions.'

Under UN rules Iraq may purchase food and medicine through the regulated sale of limited amounts of oil. However under the oil for food program many basic items such as chlorine, essential for water purification, are banned because of their alleged potential for use in chemical weapons production. The quantity of food, medicine and other basic materials reaching Iraq is far short of the minimum needed to sustain the population.

The sensational coverage in the US media of the alleged dangers posed by Iraqi 'weapons of mass destruction' is in sharp contrast to its silence on the deaths of countless Iraqis from sickness and malnutrition. The systematic and deliberate destruction of a modern country and the starvation of its citizens represent one of the greatest atrocities in recent times.

According to the UN's own figures the sanctions have resulted in an increase of 90,000 deaths per year. A report released earlier this year by the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) said, 'The Oil for Food plan has not yet resulted in adequate protection of Iraq's children from malnutrition/disease. Those children spared from death continue to remain deprived of essential rights addressed in the Conventions of Rights of the Child.'

It noted that the breakdown of the Iraqi economy due to the sanctions has resulted in widespread unemployment, a huge increase in poverty and the collapse of the educational system. The Iraqi dinar has plunged in value, falling from US\$3 to less than one-

tenth of a cent. The fall in the price of oil has reduced the already limited revenue Iraq receives from the sale of petroleum. Iraqi crude oil prices have slumped to \$10 a barrel, down from \$18.

Several recent visits to Iraq organized by humanitarian and religious organizations, in defiance of a US travel ban, have shed further light on the suffering of ordinary people. A recent teach-in at Wayne State University in Detroit featured eyewitness accounts of life under the embargo.

One speaker, Anwar Najar-Durak, told of the death of his father and other family members. 'It is incredibly hard to get medicine in Iraq. Kids cannot go to the doctor and get inoculations for preventable diseases. What my father died from was treatable. If he had been able to see a doctor on a regular basis he could have lived. Right after he died I lost my mom and sister.'

An older Iraqi-American woman from Detroit attending the teach-in told the *World Socialist Web Site* of her outrage at the sanctions. 'There is nothing available to them--no food, no medicine. Families have been separated. They have divided and destroyed the country completely, economically and socially.'

'What did the Iraqi people do to the world to deserve this? The big powers have always used the Iraqi people to get what they want. They have seen Iraqi children die, but it is not enough. They want to do more and more. It is so painful. One Senator blamed the Iraqi people for their mess. It is like blaming the Jews for Hitler. It is so outrageous.'

See Also:

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