Former UN official calls for an end to sanctions on Iraq

"You now have five or six thousand children dying every month"

Mike Ingram
29 January 1999

An audience of around 140 people in Sheffield, England were recently presented with a devastating exposé of the role of British and US imperialism in Iraq.

The meeting last Sunday, entitled "Against sanctions on Iraq", was addressed by former United Nations Humanitarian Coordinator for Iraq, Denis Halliday. It was part of a national tour by Halliday in the campaign for an end to sanctions against Iraq that he has pursued since resigning as head of the UN's "Oil for food programme" last Autumn. The meeting also heard from Ray Bristow, a veteran who suffers from Gulf War Syndrome and was exposed to radioactive uranium while serving in Kuwait.

Bristow began his remarks to the meeting by declaring: "As an individual I am not a pacifist. I believe in the individuals' rights to protect themselves and I also believe that a nation has a right to defend itself. That is what I believe and that was the reason that I chose to serve. Over the last few years the nation that I chose to serve and the society that runs that nation has really opened my eyes to the fact that it wasn't the nation I thought it was."

He went on to explain the horrific fate suffered in the gulf by British and Iraqi servicemen, as well as the civilian population of Iraq.

Showing pictures of the Basra Road, Bristow said: "The Iraqi troops fleeing Kuwait on the way to Basra were cut off at either end. Air attack after air attack went in and anything that moved was destroyed. The sky was so full of helicopters, shooting away, that the biggest fear of the pilots was that they would crash into each other. In the end, the pilots refused to go back and carry on. It was a turkey shoot. That is what was said. What we call the Basra Road, as I was told while in Iraq recently, they refer to as the Highway of Death."

Bristow then spoke of his own situation. He explained the symptoms gulf war veterans were suffering: memory loss, lack of concentration, muscle and joint pain, chest pains and shortage of breath. "Another very common sign is what they call 'irritable bowel syndrome'," he said. "What this means to every gulf war veteran is that they have abdominal pains on practically a daily basis; pain which feels like being kicked in the abdomen, or somebody punching you in the stomach, or ripping your intestines out and tying them in knots. It means constant diarrhoea, unless it is controlled by medication.

"Many veterans now need to wear nappies. Mood swings and irritability is very common, especially amongst those who do not understand the scientific evidence or who have not sought help. It results in violence or marriage breakdowns, violent crime. Unusual skin rashes, liver and kidney damage are also prevalent."

Bristow referred constantly to a government cover-up of the effects suffered by veterans and their continued refusal to recognise Gulf War Syndrome. "Let's just talk about liver damage. Practically every gulf war veteran I know has an enlarged liver.... All the toxic things we were exposed to, it is quite obvious that our livers would be damaged. But for all gulf war veterans, their GPs [general practitioners] receive standard letters. The government actually writes to the GP and says 'the common causes for enlarged livers are; alcohol abuse, obesity or diabetes'. We are talking about servicemen, so that is a push off. What an insult to write and say that.

"The government went to great lengths to keep the use of uranium 238 quiet. When we started to get information about uranium and found a place where we could get tested, I was the first British person to be tested by an American professor. It was identified that I had been exposed to over 100 times the safe level of uranium 238, or nuclear waste.

"When it explodes, uranium dust is blown into the atmosphere. We were told that the only danger of being exposed is if you are within the immediate vicinity of the explosion. How that can be said beats me. I remained in Saudi Arabia throughout the war and never entered Iraq or Kuwait."

To illustrate the amount of uranium used in the gulf, Bristow explained, "In 1968 a B52 bomber crashed. It was carrying an old fashioned-type atom bomb, which was a uranium weapon. To clean up this site was a multimillion-dollar exercise, with a multimillion-dollar compensation package. There would have been about 40 pounds of uranium in the warhead of an atom bomb. During the gulf war the Americans and the British used over 300 tons. Some of this was used in Saudi Arabia before the land war started, for trials. Saudi Arabia said clean it up, and it was cleaned up. Nothing has been cleaned up in Iraq. There is evidence that uranium has now filtered down into the water table in the South around the Basra area. It is affecting children, it is affecting the food chain, crops, farm animals--they have no water."

Denis Halliday then told the meeting, "We have UN troops at the moment checking the DMZ [demilitarised zone] from both the Kuwaiti and the Iraqi side. There is no doubt in my mind that they are being exposed and that this problem is still alive and well. Uranium particles left over from this 300 tons have leached into the soil, into the water system of Basra and other towns in the South and there are currently 4 or 5 million people living in that part of the country. It is going into the root crops. The vegetables that are grown in the South of Iraq then go to the market places in Baghdad and other central and northern cities.

"The Ministry of Health is monitoring the impact on the Iraqi population. In Basra or Baghdad or up in the North of Iraq, malformation at childbirth is becoming a crisis situation. Incidence has risen dramatically since this 1990-91 exposure to radiation.

"I resigned from the UN and some people think that was a mistake. There is a theory that if you stay inside you can do more. But after 34 years I feel I have been inside quite a long time. I needed the change and I

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needed to be free as a good civil servant.

"In Iraq I was the manager of this so-called oil for food programme. This was established by the member states of the Security Council to try to resolve some of the humanitarian impact of the sanctions on Iraq. From the very beginning it had problems. It was under-funded, it does not provide the wherewithal--being oil revenues--to purchase even the basic foodstuffs or medicines that the Iraqi people require.

"After eight years of sanctions you can imagine how depleted the health situation is of the great majority of the Iraqi people. The oil for food programme provides enough money to buy basic food and basic medicines. That excludes the antibiotics, the equipment needed to protect children from leukaemia or other more complicated cancers or other problems. They are not included in this programme. The money available is about 4 to 5 billion US dollars per year. It seems a lot of money, a billion US dollars. If you have a population of 22 million, however, and you want to buy 1 kilo of cheese per person per month, this would cost approximately 1 billion dollars a year."

Halliday said that the provisions made under the programme accounted only for the most basic food package, with no vegetables and no meat. "I wonder how many of us here would really like to eat that for five or six years? Some Iraqi's are fortunate. Maybe they can get vegetables from somebody who lives outside the city, although Iraq is an urban society. Of the 22 million I would guess that about 15 million are urban, meaning they don't have access to fresh produce.

"Most Iraqis today do not have the income to buy fresh fruit and vegetables and all the basics that you and I take for granted like eggs, chicken, or a piece of meat. Can you imagine how grim that has become over so many years, not just from the point of view of your palate, but from the point of view of your health?"

Halliday said UN forces in Iraq were responsible for the virtual destruction of a civilised population. "Mothers in Iraq today are very malnourished. They give birth to small infants who are malnourished. These are not being breast-fed, but are taking baby formula which is over-diluted with water that is unsafe. Why is the water unsafe? Because the coalition forces, the same people who carried out the 'turkey shoot', deliberately destroyed the civilian infrastructure of Iraq. They deliberately went after the water fonts, the treatment distribution, the sewage systems, the cold stores, the hospitals, the clinics, the schools, the manufacturing plants. This has created massive unemployment.

"All the things that make life manageable and hopeful for a great number of people were deliberately targeted, deliberately destroyed, and it has not been rebuilt."

Halliday contrasted the Iraq of today with what had existed in the 1980s. "The impression you get today in Baghdad is of decay and negligence--a lack of a budget to keep the city clean, to put water in the pipes, to sustain an attractive reasonable place, which of course it was. In the 1980s Iraq enjoyed a very high standard of public health, education, a quality of life. The government invested billions of dollars in education, health and even cars and communication facilities.

"The most vulnerable, orphans, widows--there were probably almost one million widows after the Iran-Iraq war--were getting direct food supplies, including 10 kilos of beef per month per family, and shoes and clothes and books and communications. That has collapsed.

"This was a country that enjoyed a very high standard and which today is dreadfully depleted. Because of this health situation, you now have five or six thousand children dying every month. This is a UNICEF figure, not mine. It is also endorsed by the World Health Organisation, both of which I worked with in Iraq and are still there."

Halliday said the responsibility for this situation rested with America, Britain and the UN. "We are responsible for this picture, we have got to accept that. Many say this is the fault of Saddam Hussein. That is easy and thus quite attractive, but it is too simple. We know that he is not a very attractive guy. He is a dictator, he is a miserable ... whatever you want to call him. But we are punishing the Iraqi people because we can't deal with this man. I don't think any of us can really justify that. We are knowingly killing thousands of children. We are denying them the very basics of life, safe milk, and medical care. They are dying from diarrhoea and the simplest problems because there is no medication. Between 20 and 30 percent of Iraqi children under five, or even more, are malnourished. Twenty-some percent of those will be chronically malnourished. Chronic malnutrition can lead to physical problems, mental disability or slowness of development."

Halliday stressed the future problems facing the Iraqi people. "This will lead to a whole generation of Iraqi children having attention span problems, concentration problems. This is a crime of the future. We are destroying Iraq's future. Sadly, I have to acknowledge that this is a deliberate approach. We have now got Albright, the US secretary of state, going on television in New York and saying, 'Yes, we are sorry but we do have to kill thousands of the children. It's the only way we can contain Saddam Hussein.' It is an incredible statement.

"I would classify sanctions as war, because the results certainly look like war to me." Halliday added that the actions of the coalition forces in the gulf contravened the UN's own conventions. "Some of you will know there are Geneva Conventions and protocols which govern the management of warfare. A certain irony, I always think, but nevertheless it does exist. But when it comes to sanctions, these conventions do not apply. They have been completely ignored.

"One aspect of these conventions is that civilian targets should not be targeted by military activity. What did we see? The coalition forces bombed civilian targets. The sanctions are specifically targeted on men, children and women. It is a complete breach of that convention. How can that possibly be justifiable?

"We are familiar with mortality rates, perhaps malnutrition. You have seen those photographs of children in hospital. I have been there. I got involved in November 1997 with a small ward of four children with leukaemia. There are thousands of children suffering, but you can't deal with thousands. You can deal sometimes with four. So I decided, as a gift to myself, I would try to solve the problems of these four children. I managed, through some connections, to get the drugs from Jordan and Turkey for the children to be given care for their leukaemia for a two-year period. By the time I got back to the hospital--it took six weeks--two of the children were dead. The other two, hopefully, are still alive and on these drugs. But it hit me; this is what is happening.

"And the doctors who run these hospitals, can you imagine the agony they go through, knowing they can't really help these children? You saw the intensive care, the paediatric intensive care facilities; there is nothing these men and women can do. They see it every day. The mothers sit there beside their children. It is just a horrible situation."

Halliday then turned his attention to what he termed the "social consequence" of the sanctions. "After the Iran-Iraq war, you already had many single parent families. Many of them and many of the families with two parents have sold their houses, their property and furniture, just to keep food on the table. Children are being taken out of school and asked to beg on the streets. Others are turning to street crime because there is no other option. Women, young girls or daughters, are being put into prostitution because that is another way to bring money into the family. Women who hope to get married have no hope. The men are not there, there is no money. Professional women have given up their careers in order to go into sweatshops and make simple things, because that is where the money is. Ten thousand teachers have quit because there is no money to pay salaries. Fixed income people have been badly hit by devaluation of the dinar and inflation crises.

"The middle class and the professional classes, the people who you may have thought might change the system of government in Iraq, are

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extremely hard hit. There is no possibility, in my view, of any democratic government emerging. It just cannot happen. That can only happen when the sanctions are removed, when life goes back to normal and people are confident that their children will live because there is medical attention; that parents will live longer because of the medical attention; that there are schools, jobs, all the things you and I take for granted. Then maybe we will see political change which could be very positive."

Halliday concluded by calling for the total lifting of sanctions. "People will say, 'Oh my god, you must be crazy! Saddam Hussein will take the money, he will rebuild his army and he will attack either Kuwait or somewhere else.' I don't buy that.... Give Iraq its oil revenues. Give them credit to rebuild the infrastructure that is so fundamental to a society. Give them the money to rebuild the economy and get this country back to normal."

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