

Nationwide tour opposes Iraq sanctions

Former UN relief coordinator speaks in Detroit

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17 March 1999

The former coordinator of the United Nations "oil for food" program in Iraq, Denis Halliday, spoke in the Detroit suburb of Southfield, Michigan on March 14 to an audience of about 500 people. The public meeting was part of a nationwide speaking tour opposing the economic sanctions that have inflicted untold death and suffering on the Iraqi people.

Halliday resigned his post as UN Humanitarian Coordinator for Iraq last fall to protest the ongoing sanctions. He denounced the oil for food program as hopelessly inadequate and accused the United States and other industrial powers of carrying out the equivalent of genocide against the Iraqi people.

The Detroit area is home to the largest Iraqi and Arab immigrant population in the United States. The meeting attracted a wide audience, including students, local social activists, as well as Iraqi Chaldeans, Palestinians and other immigrants from the Middle East.

The tour, which has already visited 15 US cities, has attracted sizable turnouts, but has been boycotted by the big business media. Following this pattern, no television station covered the Southfield meeting and neither the *Detroit News* nor the *Free Press*, the two largest local dailies, reported the event.

The speaking tour is being sponsored by the American Friends Service Committee, the Arab-American Anti-Discrimination Committee and a number of other liberal and religious-pacifist organizations. Touring with Halliday is Phyllis Bennis, of the Institute for Policy Studies in Washington DC, who has written several books critical of US policy in the Middle East.

Halliday's visit to the Detroit area took place against a background of almost daily US bombing raids on Iraq. On March 15 US jets again dropped laser-guided bombs in northern and southern parts of the country. According to an Iraqi military spokesman the planes dropped bombs on civilian and military sites near the northern city of Mosul.

Iraqi officials said one civilian was wounded in another US bombing attack in southern Iraq.

Despite claims that it is targeting only Saddam Hussein and his military, US policy is directed against the country's population as a whole. In late February US warplanes damaged a control center for the oil pipeline in northern Iraq that delivers oil under the oil for food program. Disabling the pipeline temporarily cut off the source of revenue to purchase food and medicine for the Iraqi people.

Last week 40 US congressmen from oil producing states urged the Clinton administration to suspend or reduce the amount of oil Iraq is allowed to sell under the oil for food program. The congressmen claimed Iraqi oil exports may be a factor behind "the excess supply and very low prices that currently exist." Without any evidence, the congressmen suggested that Iraqi President Saddam Hussein was not distributing humanitarian supplies sent to Iraq.

Another indication of the role of commercial interests in shaping the Clinton administration's policy toward Iraq was revealed in a comment by Bennis toward the close of the Southfield meeting. Responding to a question on the role of the US oil industry in the Middle East, she noted that while in Texas she and Halliday had been approached by an oil company executive who supported ending the UN humanitarian aid program as part of an effort to shut off all Iraqi petroleum exports. He expressed the hope that this would boost the US oil industry by increasing world market prices.

In his opening remarks to the meeting Halliday noted the difficulty in getting media coverage of his speaking tour. He said it was not lack of interest but lack of information that prevented the American people from raising an outcry against the sanctions. He said he firmly believed that if the American people knew that US-supported sanctions against Iraq were leading to the deaths of thousands of children, they would put a stop to them.

While expressing hope that the United States could be

pressured into adopting a more enlightened foreign policy, Halliday denounced the present policies of Washington and the UN in the strongest of terms. "We of the UN are taking away the right of healthcare, housing and education," he said. "The UN is worse than Saddam Hussein in many respects."

"The coalition forces during the gulf war deliberately attacked civilian targets and set about destroying electricity grids, water purification and wastewater treatment systems. That was the beginning of the total destruction of Iraq. By all accounts conditions in Iraq today are worse than what they were in 1991 and 1992. In Saddam Hussein Hospital in Baghdad there are wards of children dying of leukemia. It is a terrible thing to witness. It is a reality in Iraq today."

He continued, "Thousands under the age of five are dying from malnutrition and diseases curable by antibiotics. Preventative healthcare in Iraq has largely collapsed. More than 30 percent of children under the age of five are suffering from malnutrition. The loss of elderly people is common due to the lack of basic medical equipment and drugs."

Halliday described the bloodlust of the American military, recounting a recent conversation he had had with an aid to Norman Schwartzkopf, the US commander who led Operation Desert Storm. In the words of Halliday this US officer expressed "glee" at the prospect of an Iraqi attack on US bases in Turkey, hoping this would give the US military the excuse to launch massive new attacks against the already devastated country.

The sanctions have done almost irreparable damage to every facet of life. Halliday estimated that some 2 million professionals had emigrated since the sanctions in search of work. Some 10,000 teachers had quit, unable to work under conditions of overcrowded classrooms, lack of textbooks, malnourished students and inadequate heat and ventilation.

Archeological sites are being looted throughout Iraq because the government can no longer afford to pay guards. Priceless Mesopotamian artifacts, once unavailable, are now appearing on the markets of Europe.

Halliday explained that the amount of money allotted to Iraq to buy food and medicine under the oil for food program, \$4 billion for 23 million people, was inadequate to maintain even a minimal level of existence. He disputed reports that the suffering of the Iraqi people was due to the diversion of humanitarian aid by the Iraqi regime. He said that in his tenure as humanitarian aid director, UN monitors had found that the Iraqi regime had handled distribution with great efficiency and saw no evidence of misappropriation by government officials.

Even if sanctions were lifted today, Halliday said, it would take Iraq 15 to 20 years to recover from the impact. Some

\$12 billion would be required, he said, just to repair Iraq's electrical system.

He accused the Western powers of using a double standard in determining what it deemed aggression. Israel, he noted, has carried out the illegal occupation of south Lebanon for 20 years and Turkey invades Iraqi territory at will. Meanwhile, the United States is selling billions of dollars worth of arms to countries throughout the Middle East, many with regimes guilty of serious human rights abuses.

The next speaker, Phyllis Bennis, focused on the difficulty of breaking through the media silence on the death and suffering in Iraq. "In every city we visited, we were told that this is the worst media anywhere in the country, and it was hard to argue. Some reporters told us 'we would like to report this, but it is not news.'

"If you were to read the US press you would believe that history in Iraq began August 2, 1990, the day of the invasion of Kuwait. You would forget that Iraq had been a junior partner of the United States."

She pointed out that the United States had sold Iraq much of that country's supply of chemical weapons. She noted that in its final weapons inspection tour United Nations monitors were looking for documents, not arms. The documents they were looking for were records of Iraq's weapons suppliers. She suggested one reason the US was so interested in securing the documents was to prevent the names of US firms supplying weapons to Iraq from falling into the hands of the public.

During a question and answer period following the meeting Halliday reported that the pharmaceutical plant in Sudan destroyed by US cruise missiles last August had a contract with the United Nations to supply veterinary vaccines to Iraq. "They had a one-quarter million dollar contract for vaccines for goat and sheep screw worms causing disease in Iraq. When the plant was destroyed the contract went down the drain with it."



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