

The terrible impact of sanctions on Iraq: An interview with journalist Felicity Arbuthnot

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One of the speakers at the London rally last Saturday was Felicity Arbuthnot, a free-lance journalist specialising in social and environmental issues. She was nominated last year for the Lorenzo Natali Award for Human Rights Journalism. She spoke to the WSWS about the situation in Iraq, having been in the country no less than 17 times since the Gulf War ended.

This demonstration today is still trying to focus on Iraq, because the sanctions now have been going on for nine years. They have the highest infant mortality rate in the world, and this for a 'developing country' that had a very low rate of infant mortality in the past. Before the war, they had 93 percent access to clean water and to very good sophisticated health service. But by 1993 malnutrition and infant mortality were the equal of Mali. That was only three years into the sanctions.

The Food and Agricultural Organisation of the United Nations had advised Iraq to import most of their foods, medicines, etc. So when the sanctions came in, 70 percent of everything was imported. This left them in a desperate situation.

I came back last month from my seventeenth visit since the Gulf War, and I'm going back again next month. My first visit was at the end of 1991, which was less than a year after the end of the war. I've watched a country slide from the impossible to the apocalyptic. It's as simple as that. I'm somebody who has seen a lot of war zones and is not naive. When I went there I thought, this is unique. Honestly I can say I have never seen such devastation--places that were reduced almost overnight to what can only be described as a pre-industrial age, just like what is happening now in the former Yugoslavia. The entire infrastructure was targeted--the water, the electricity, telecommunications--which means that they really lost everything.

To give you an example: There has been a lot of criticism recently about the food in Iraq not being distributed. There are no telephones outside Baghdad now, so there is no possibility of communication with the rest of the country. They no longer even have refrigerated trucks, so they have to get stuff quickly to a point of distribution. But there has got to be a refrigerated warehouse. They don't know what they need and they don't know whether the electricity is on or off. During the Gulf War every single normality was destroyed and it's gone downhill from there.

The conditions for children would break your heart. This is a country where childhood has just been condemned to the trash heap. Most children born in Iraq since 1990 haven't ever tasted chocolate. Toys have been vetoed. Ping-Pong balls were vetoed, children's bicycles were vetoed--all by the UN sanctions committee. All of this is verifiable. Paper, textbooks, storybooks--you name it, all the things children need for a normal life have been denied them.

And it's much worse than that. According to the most recent UNICEF report, Iraq has the highest rate of childhood mortality in the world. And when children die through lack of medicine or malnutrition, if the child was born since 1990, parents don't even have a photograph, because photographic materials are vetoed. Film is vetoed, processing materials are vetoed. So this child is gone, completely lost with not even a photograph to remember them by.

Nobody could honestly say that one horrendous situation was worse than another. But I can tell you the reason why I got so involved in Iraq. In all the other war zones I had been to, I had this little voice in my head saying, 'Right, this is not my fault. It's some machete-wielding butcher in Rwanda or some murderous dictator.' But this is so unique because all

the devastation and suffering is in the name of the United Nations.

There's a black joke in Basra, that if there was a war between France and Britain, Basra would be bombed, because Basra is always bombed.

I'll tell you about a hospital that I visited last month in Basra in the south of Iraq. I asked a doctor, 'Can I walk around your hospital?' and she said, 'Yes,' and walked around with me. Iraq now has the highest rate of premature babies and the highest rate of babies born of premature weight, because of environmental factors, lack of nutrition, etc. We went into one ward and there were 17 babies of premature weight, all absolutely perfect. There was no properly working incubator, no oxygen and no re-hydration facilities. There was absolutely nothing. All those babies would have survived in Britain or in any normal country.

As we were standing in the ward, one of them died--a perfect baby--and I found myself, like a really crazy person, just stroking this little face, over and over again. It was still warm and I was feeling in a strange way that perhaps I could bring it back. As we left the ward, the doctor said to me, 'Do you know, we haven't had one premature baby survive since 1994.'

I know there's a lot of scepticism about, and some people say to me, 'Oh, you're just being manipulated,' but I've been to Iraq so many times now that I can just walk into places absolutely off the street. So I believe what I see to be true and anything I'm not sure of, I don't talk about.

In the same hospital in Basra there was a very simple thing that happened. There was a photographer, an interpreter and myself and we had had walked in off the street. Two doctors came running up, and one of them said, 'Do any of you have O negative blood?' I panicked and couldn't remember my blood group, but I asked her why she wanted to know. She said a newly born baby needed an exchange transfusion and they didn't even have a working blood bank, and they needed blood for this tiny baby. It's completely treatable. My own son was born prematurely and suffered from the same condition. I said 'Try me, I can't remember.' But she couldn't because they didn't even have laboratory facilities, so they couldn't test me.

'This baby was suffering from jaundice. I saw him. He was bright yellow, as you would imagine--just a day old. His mother was absolutely out of her mind with

worry. The British Defence Secretary George Robertson was talking about collateral damage recently. This is obscene. What I witnessed in Iraq is 'collateral damage'. And there was this baby, in a poverty-stricken country that is sitting on the largest oil reserves on this planet.

In Kosovo, NATO is using the same weapons and carrying out the same demonisation. They have just replaced the 'Butcher of Baghdad' with the 'Butcher of Belgrade'. And every single person has been dehumanised, just like these babies in Iraq, just like these mothers in Iraq. We are using the same weapons; we tend to forget that Serbia too has been under a UN embargo for I don't know how many years.

I can only tell you what happens when I look at the map. You look at former Yugoslavia. If you look at the Balkans and then you come down to our NATO ally, Turkey, which is linked in with the bombing and which is linked in with the oil-for-food deal with Iraq and is making plenty of money out of it too. Then you come further down and there are Syria, Iraq, Iran and Saudi Arabia. Then you look to the east and there is the former Soviet Union.

Everybody in this whole vast area is feeling disassociated, unsettled, and nervous about the expansion of NATO. If you just look at what we have done over this last three weeks, there is a common feeling of fear. There is a danger that the whole area will get together and, like Bismarck said, the next world war will start with a silly little mistake in the Balkans. Except that this is not a silly little mistake. NATO has done something reckless and criminal.



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