Eye witness account of the impact of war and sanctions on Iraq

"It really is a New World Order imposed by Britain and the US"

Part One

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Felicity Arbuthnot is a freelance journalist, who has visited Iraq on many occasions since the end of the Gulf War. She has just returned to Britain from her eighteenth visit. In the first of a two-part interview she explained to Barbara Slaughter how she became involved.

Like many others I had opposed the Gulf War. I knew that, like the war in Yugoslavia, it was about the strategic interests of the western powers and not about either Saddam Hussein or "little Kuwait". At the end of the war I thought, "We did our best and failed. And now the rebuilding of the country will begin."

A few months later I attended a press conference given by Magne Raundalen, a Norwegian professor in child psychology, and Eric Hoskins, a Canadian public health expert, on child trauma in Iraq. They were the first people to report what was actually going on.

Nothing was being done to help and I felt impelled to go to Iraq and see for myself. A week later I was in Baghdad and I was appalled by what I saw. It was a country which had, as James Baker had threatened, literally been reduced to a pre-industrial age; a country, which had been highly dependent on modern technology, was just being left to rot. What was unique was that this was done in the name of the people of the United Nations. It will go down in history as one of the great crimes of the twentieth century, along with the Holocaust, Pol Pot and the bombing of Dresden.

This was my 18th visit to Iraq since the Gulf War. The last four have been very close together: last October, January/February, I went back at the end of March and then again in May.

Each time I am struck by the deterioration. Each time there is another horror. In March it was the daily bombing of the infrastructure. The electricity has just died. Many people can't afford candles and use makeshift lamps. People put a wick in a bottle with oil and quite often the bottle explodes. The injuries have soared. The burns are horrendous and there is no treatment, not even cling film as an emergency measure to cover the wounds. There are no painkillers. There is no plastic surgery.

There were two other things I noticed. Like with every embargo in history, there was a small amount of profiteering in money dealing. You have a fraction of the population at the top of the regime who have family abroad sending in dollars. There are restaurants springing up. You can get Christian Dior sunglasses, absolutely anything. Yet 98 percent of the population don't have a way of sterilising burns.

The other thing that struck me was the breakdown in the spirit of these very brave people. They feel that it is never, ever, going to end. Yet when I became ill on this trip, they were so concerned. I suddenly collapsed in the hotel foyer in Mosul and was virtually unconscious. My interpreter and my driver kept letting themselves into my room, touching me on the head and saying: “Are you all right? Shall we get a doctor?" They were saying, “You keep coming back here and Iraq has made you so ill."

I was in and out of consciousness for about 18 hours. I don't know what caused it. I just think the atmosphere is poisoned. The colleague I was with was also affected. She would be ill and I would do the interviews and then she would do the interviews the next day. We didn't go to hospital because we felt that we would be taking medicines needed for other people, so we just battled on. It was a nightmare, but they were apologising to us because Iraq, where they had to live, had made us ill.

Another thing that struck me was the unique way they have of announcing a death in Iraq. They have these death notices, which are called naie. They take a large piece of black muslin and they write on it in white—the name, the age, the cause of death. Then they write the name in bright yellow. They put one outside the home and, if the person has died somewhere else, one there too. In March, if you were driving around for an entire day, you might see perhaps two. This time, in 13 blocks in one area of Baghdad, I counted 18. It became a thing, to count them. In one very small square, there were three on one wall—so the whole family had died—and one on the opposite wall.

Iraq has been more or less at war for 20 years, starting with the Iran-Iraq war. It is a nation that has been starving for 10 years. The doctors say that more and more people are dying, particularly young men aged 30 to 35. These are young men who have had all their formative years under the embargo. Now they see middle age approaching and they just give up and die.

Mosul is in the “no-fly zone”. What a misnomer! The British and the Americans are bombing there every single day—with a two-week break in March and a four-day break in May. One day last week, there were 100 sorties. At night you can't sleep for the sound of anti-aircraft guns.

I'd gone to the area near Mosul because I'd heard that they were bombing flocks of sheep. Middle Eastern friends told me that it was becoming like a target practice for the pilots. They are also bombing in Basra but I was in Basra in March. Mosul has the largest Christian population in Iraq. It has ancient Christian monasteries and wonderful buildings that go back to the time of Petra. I went in search of the flocks of sheep and found one in the middle of the plain, in the middle of nowhere, that had been bombed on April 13.

We went to the village where the family of the shepherds lived. A little, tiny, very poor, pastoral village of Christians and Muslims, with no oil installations and no military. The houses were built like the adobe houses in Arizona. These people had been living together in a mixed society of Muslims and Christians for centuries.

The bombing took place on a Friday, the Muslim Sabbath, and a very hot day. There were 105 sheep and goats. About 50 people had gone down to the plain with the shepherds. In the early dawn, before it got hot, they

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were having a kind of Sabbath celebration and sharing their food and drink. Then the villagers drifted off and the family of six were left. There was the grandfather, who was 60, the son who was 37, and the four children of whom the youngest was a boy of six.

As they left, the villagers heard a plane circling. It circled for about three hours, and they were listening because the area has been bombed so many times. Then they heard the bombing and they ran to see if they could help. They searched for the entire day, and by nightfall, they could only find enough remains to bury the family in two tombs instead of six. They could identify the torso of the old man, and that's all they found. His head, his arms, his legs, were all blown off.

The six-year-old boy, Soultan, had just finished his second term in school. His marks had been very good and he was so proud of them. There is still this incredible adherence and passion for culture and education in Iraq. He had got a ballpoint pen (vetoed by the UN) and a piece of paper (also vetoed by the UN), and taken them down into the fields with the sheep to practice his writing and arithmetic.

The villagers couldn't identify even one bit of him. One of his relations looked at me and grabbed my notebook. It was a very personal thing—almost like a sort of "witness". He said, “I have to write not you. I have to write their names down in your book.” His hand was shaking and he had tears on his cheeks. When he wrote the name of the little boy he said, “What do they want from us? All he had was his pen. Is that what they want?”

This area is in the middle of a huge plain, surrounded by mountains, with a tiny village nearby. The sheep would have stood out starkly. The family had a red tractor with them and a battered white Toyota pick-up truck pulling a water barrel for the sheep. All of this would have been clearly visible.

I spoke with a Dominican priest, who was from the Lebanon. He was 60 years old and very academic and measured, but he was incandescent with fury. He told me that the Iraqi people are very moral, and that they only had their dignity and their morality left. He said, “Just before you arrived, 24 people in a Christian village, a small pastoral community living totally off the land, were killed by an American bomb. It's just the Americans and the British."

I heard this repeatedly. “The planes take off usually from Turkish air bases,” he continued. “We keep reading in the western media that they are bombing legitimate targets—such as radar that is locked on to them. Why don't they say that they are bombing just for the sake of it, because that's what we see?

“Every day mothers are losing children, children are losing mothers and fathers, brothers are losing sisters, sisters are losing brothers. This is the cost of it.”

He made a very interesting point, which the Ministry of Defence and the Americans won't talk about. He said, “They are bombing from a distance of fifteen kilometres, but our anti-aircraft guns only have a distance of five kilometres. So how can we be a threat to them?”

I rang the Ministry of Defence and said, “I've just come back from Iraq and I've seen evidence that you are bombing sheep. What are your comments?” The spokesman replied, “We reserve the right to take robust action whenever we are threatened.” I asked “Against sheep?” Then I just gave up and put the phone down.

Another question that has to be asked is whether they are continuing to use depleted uranium bombs? I looked for evidence, but didn't find many pieces of the tractor and none of the bomb. The relatives told me that the authorities took the fragments away. They said it was a 500lb bomb, and the crater confirmed this. But I couldn't get confirmation of what type it was. The senior spokesman at the Iraqi Ministry of Defence said, “We are not releasing anything on the bombing until we are one hundred percent sure, because everything we say is rubbished by the western press and the United Nations.” In my experience this is true.

I asked the Ministry of Defence in Britain whether depleted uranium missiles are being used in northern Iraq, but they refused to comment. I asked whether they were using them in Yugoslavia and were we going to see a crop of birth defects and cancer like we are seeing in Iraq? Are we going to see a rerun of Gulf War syndrome now the soldiers are on the ground? He replied, “Our personnel have been given the strictest instructions, handed down by the Minister for the Armed Forces, Douglas Henderson, to all the senior officers, that none of our personnel are to approach anything that might have been hit with depleted uranium—any burned out tanks—absolutely totally not. And if it is unavoidable they are to be issued with special instructions, special protective clothing, and special breathing apparatus."

I then said, (and this applies of course both to Iraq and Yugoslavia), "Excuse me, but what about the people living there? What about the refugees?" He would only address Yugoslavia and he said, "That's up to UNHCR". So I asked if UNHCR had been informed. He didn't know and I haven't been able to contact anyone that does know.

One of the questions I've asked both in the west and in Iraq is why are they targeting sheep, and I really can't come to a conclusion. It seems so irrational, but I wonder, is it just target practice, or is it their intention is to destroy the food chain? For these pastoral people, the sheep, the barley and the wheat they produce are everything. It's so basic and nothing is wasted. They use the meat and they sell the excess. They use the leather. They use the wool. Every single bit of it is utilised. They boil down the bones for soup, for gelatine and for preserving. This is all they have.

After the Gulf War even the date crop went wrong. Dates are just dates. They sit on top of a palm tree and just grow. You don't spray them with anything or fertilise them. But there was no date crop for five years. The date harvest in Iraq is a big thing. They have nearly 600 different kinds of dates and they were the world's biggest exporter. But they killed the date crop.

Since then there has been the screwworm epidemic, foot and mouth disease, which are both non-endemic to that country. There are now reports of locusts—also non-endemic. It's difficult to know what is going on, but what is certain is that there are diseases happening right across agriculture affecting flora and fauna, in Iraq that have never been seen before.

All over the area where the bombing happened there are monasteries going back to the period just after Christ. There is a Dominican monastery where it is said that St Matthew was buried. On the other side of the valley, there's a mosque named after Jonah, who is reputed to be buried in the same place. We went to this wonderful Christian monastery on top of a mountain and I interviewed one of the priests. He was blind. He told me that St Matthew had powers of healing and people come for healing from all over Iraq, from all denominations and all religions, to this ancient little chapel.

While we were there an ambulance drew up. There aren't many of them, so they must have been a relatively wealthy family. Inside was a woman who had been in a coma for eight months. Something had gone wrong with the anaesthetic she had been given. There are all sorts of problems with the stuff that's going in. The woman was a Muslim and her father was a surgeon in the same hospital where she was being cared for. They were coming for healing from a Christian saint, and just down in the valley we were bombing pastoralists with their flocks of sheep.

On May 18, Tam Dalyel MP asked Tony Blair why the bombing was continuing. Blair replied, and I quote, "We are doing it for the protection of the people of Iraq." When I told this to the Dominican priest, he said, "They are saying this in the British parliament? In the Mother of Parliaments they are saying this?”

The current claim from Blair and Clinton is that Iraq is withholding food and medicine—that the warehouses of Baghdad are overflowing. But even a spokesman for the UN has admitted that the logistical problems are an

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absolute nightmare. There are no refrigerated trucks; there are no phones outside Baghdad. You have to target these inadequate amounts very carefully. You have to know what Basra, which is seven or eight hours away, actually needs, You have to know whether they have a refrigerated warehouse. Well you probably know that they haven't, because the electricity is off practically seven days a week now. So what are you supposed to do—commit medicines to an unrefrigerated truck, probably to arrive at a warehouse that has no refrigeration, then take it back when it's going to be totally destroyed?

A few months ago a large consignment of medical equipment finally arrived in Baghdad that had been vetoed by the US since 1990. There were scanners, X-ray equipment and other sophisticated stuff. But what nobody at the UN had taken on board was that Iraq's technical knowledge is so out of date now, that they are not able to install it. They also lacked the necessary materials for the job. For example, they need special cement, because if there is anything wrong in the cement it can interfere with the readings. So the equipment that is desperately needed in the hospitals is just sitting in a warehouse.

Al Mansour Hospital in Baghdad, was once one of the finest teaching hospitals in the Middle East. Most of the time it has no electricity. The temperature is about 125 degrees Fahrenheit; the heat is such that you are constantly in your own personal steam bath. There are children, mainly leukaemia victims, dying in these impossible conditions. And the equipment needed for their treatment can't be installed because they haven't got the parts for the generators. When the electricity does come on you get a big surge in power, then it dies again, and then another surge. You can't keep having these sudden great power surges without it affecting the machines. So they can't be used.

Yet the bombing continues and has done every single day since the "cessation of hostilities" after the four-day bombing in December 1998. We've destroyed the entire infrastructure. And now our representatives stand up in parliament and in the Senate and blame Iraq for not being able to distribute stuff. It's double standards on a scale almost impossible to comprehend.

I walked round the wards in hospitals in Baghdad and in Mosul, and I looked around at those kids who could be saved but were dying, for want of chemotherapy. I was with the doctors, who were trained to heal. If they had done everything they possibly could and a child died, it would be a disaster. But they hadn't even got the necessary tools. I asked them, "How do you feel? How do you cope? How do you even get here?" Every time I got the same reaction. They almost cried and said, "You are the first person to ask me that. Everybody leans on me. How do I cope?"

One doctor told me how he'd got a job at Al Mansour hospital. He was a senior house officer and he was really proud, in spite of his problems. He thought "I'm young and I'll survive the embargo. I still feel I have to put something back."

He said that when he came to work there he had a car and now it has collapsed. The hospital is about twenty minutes drive from the centre of Baghdad, but the public transport system has also collapsed. When he leaves work to go home he has to walk to the main road, which takes him about an hour. Then he has to hitch hike and wait until a car stops. And because of the collapse of the social fabric, he is not even sure that the person who picks him up isn't going to mug him for the few dinars he has on him. Then, at maybe four or five o'clock the next morning, he has to walk back on to the main road, hitch a lift and then walk an hour back to the hospital. This is how the doctors survive.

I spoke to a senior charge nurse whom I've known for years. She was one of the few nurses left in the hospital and again her salary wouldn't buy you a bus ticket back into town. But she is committed because she has been there for 27 years, and she told me how proud she was in her job and her passion for these children.

She encourages them to draw pictures, if there is anything for them to draw with. She took me round the wards and said, "This is Jasmine's picture, this is so-and-so's picture". Then she looked at me and at these beautiful pictures, of birds and trees and stars—one had a lovely person in a wedding dress, you know, children's pictures with sunshine and so on. She told me all their names and ages and said, "She died yesterday. He died last week. He died three months ago." Then she looked at herself in what I thought was a very neat, white uniform and said, "Look, look. I would have been so ashamed to come out like this, but now I don't care anymore." What had been her tights she had cut down and down as they had split round the back and got more and more tattered and she was now wearing them as sort of pop socks.

Then she said to me "I've only water to offer you, but it's clean." She explained how difficult it is, because her monthly salary wouldn't even buy three bottles of clean water. But she and her sister had found a way of filtering the water that they thought was ok. "You know I wouldn't offer it to you if I thought it would make you ill," she said. She explained to me in this hundred and twenty-five-degree temperature how, about three weeks before, her refrigerator had finally died. A refrigerator costs three million dinars and her monthly salary is three thousand. She explained that in this great heat they somehow needed the water to be cold. The refrigerators in the hospital do sometimes work, at least when the electricity is on. So having found a way of filtering the water, she takes what she knows is dangerous ice from the hospital refrigerators and adds it to her drinking water—this is the crazy upside down world that is Iraq.

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