

Clinton administration blocks easing of sanctions against Iraq

Barry Grey

28 September 1999

After two weeks of intensive negotiations within the United Nations Security Council, the United States has blocked efforts by France, Russia and China to lift sanctions against Iraq. Washington has thereby ensured the continuation of a policy which must rank as one of the great crimes against humanity of the twentieth century.

Only last month the UN children's agency, UNICEF, released a study showing that nine years of economic embargo, compounded by the devastation from two air wars, have produced a "humanitarian emergency." UNICEF reported that mortality rates among infants and children under five in the central and southern parts of the country which are controlled by Baghdad, where 85 percent of Iraqis live, have more than doubled since 1989. The study further concluded that 20 percent of Iraqi children under five suffer from stunted growth caused by malnutrition.

UNICEF estimated that 500,000 child deaths are attributable to the sanctions.

A number of other reports and eyewitness accounts have documented the existence of a social catastrophe in Iraq, resulting from the relentless economic, political and military assault by the most powerful nation in the world. In recent years Bill Clinton and his counterparts in Europe have employed the term "genocide" with near abandon to demonize leaders and regimes targeted for attack. But if anything in the past decade approaches the level of genocide, it is the systematic destruction of an entire nation carried out by the United States against Iraq.

To cite some of the indices of this tragedy:

* Iraq claims that from August 6, 1990, when UN sanctions were first imposed in response to the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, to late August of this year, 1,187,486 Iraqis died from sanctions-related causes. The United Nations estimates that 1 million have died, mostly children.

* Iraq's economy has been shattered by sanctions and US-led bombings. Industry, irrigation, sanitation, the supply of clean water, healthcare and education have virtually collapsed. Baghdad claims the country's Gross Domestic Product is presently one-third of its pre-1991 level.

* Studies have shown a drastic increase in the rate of birth defects and cancer as a result of environmental poisoning from depleted uranium weapons.

* Jutta Burghardt, the head of the UN's World Food Program in Iraq, told a delegation of US congressional staffers earlier this month that Iraqi families spend approximately 70 percent of their total income for food. Burghardt said that by world and UN standards, that figure indicates "imminent famine."

* Denis Halliday, the former United Nations Humanitarian

Coordinator for Iraq, who resigned in protest over the continuation of sanctions, claims the embargo is responsible for the death of 6,000 Iraqis every month.

His successor, Hans von Sponek, on September 19 called for an immediate and unconditional lifting of most sanctions, so as to permit a larger inflow of food, medicine and most other Iraqi imports. In a tacit, but pointed, attack on the US, he deplored the use of the Iraqi people as a "human shield" in the drive to topple the regime of Iraqi President Saddam Hussein.

On September 24, following the collapse of negotiations within the Security Council over Iraqi sanctions, French Foreign Minister Hubert Védrine issued an even more blunt attack on Washington, saying, "The United States is insensitive to the human catastrophe under way in Iraq."

The American response to growing criticism of the sanctions is to claim that responsibility for the humanitarian disaster in Iraq lies entirely with the regime of Saddam Hussein. In anticipation of the Security Council debate and this month's opening session of the General Assembly, the US State Department released a report charging that Baghdad has refused to distribute food and medical supplies provided under a limited oil-for-food program overseen by the UN. The State Department showed satellite photos of what it claims is a luxurious retreat recently built for Saddam Hussein's inner circle, as if this fact, if true, absolved the US from responsibility for the suffering of the Iraqi masses.

Meanwhile, the US has used its muscle within the UN agency overseeing the oil-for-food program to block the export to Iraq of essential nonmilitary goods such as water and sanitation devices.

In recent days US spokesmen, including Washington's ambassador to the UN Richard Holbrooke, have gone even further, suggesting that Saddam Hussein should be indicted by an international court for crimes against humanity. The Americans continue to maintain the absurd fiction that Iraq represents a major nuclear, chemical and biological weapons threat to the rest of the Middle East, a claim that none of the Arab states in the region endorse. In response to criticism from the French and others, US State Department spokesman James P. Rubin said the US is "sensitive to the dangers that could come from allowing Saddam Hussein and his *mad military machine* access to additional funds" (our emphasis).

This statement comes from a government that last December, together with its junior partner, Britain, carried out a four-day air blitz of Iraq and has since conducted hundreds of bombing raids in the so-called no-fly zones in the North and South of the country. Since the end of "Operation Desert Fox" last December, American and British war planes have carried out 10,000 sorties, launched 1,000 bombs and

missiles and attacked 400 positions. This is more than triple the number of air strikes conducted during the four-day air war.

The US continues to deploy a substantial force in the gulf, poised to unleash a new round of all-out bombing. This includes 22,000 military personnel, over 200 aircraft and 19 warships, including an aircraft carrier.

US officials claim the ongoing bombing campaign is a matter of self-defense. American and British pilots, flying 15,000 feet above Iraqi territory and well out of the range of Iraqi air defense systems, are supposedly responding to Iraqi anti-aircraft and the intrusion of Iraqi jets into the no-fly zones. However these zones were unilaterally imposed by the US, Britain and France in 1991 and 1992, without even the fig leaf of a UN resolution. Since last December's air war, Baghdad has carried out a policy of defying the no-fly zones, declaring them a gross violation of Iraqi sovereignty.

The US-British air strikes are routinely conducted against targets selected in advance of any Iraqi violations of the no-fly zones and against facilities far removed from the areas where such incidents do occur. Nonmilitary targets are frequently hit. Iraq claims that 187 civilians have been killed in these raids since late December of last year.

As a result of last year's air war and the ongoing bombing campaign, the US has become increasingly isolated in international diplomatic circles. Washington's intransigent position toward Iraq was delivered a further blow earlier this year when UN weapons inspectors and other UN officials revealed that the CIA had infiltrated agents into the weapons inspections agency (UNSCOM) and was using it to target Saddam Hussein for assassination. (These revelations confirmed repeated charges from Baghdad that UNSCOM was a de facto spy agency of US and Israeli intelligence.)

Even the venal Arab bourgeois regimes that initially supported UN sanctions against Iraq have reversed their position. Last week the Arab League publicly called for the lifting of sanctions. The ruling circles in the gulf states, Egypt and the rest of north Africa, Syria, Jordan and Lebanon are well aware that mounting popular outrage throughout the Arab world over the destruction of the Iraqi people represents a potential threat to their own rule.

France, Russia and China all have a definite economic and geopolitical stake in easing the embargo on Iraq. French oil companies have entered into potentially lucrative deals with Iraq to develop the country's vast oil deposits. Russia stands to collect large debts from Iraq if and when the country is able to resume full oil production, and both Moscow and Peking are reportedly negotiating agreements for joint exploration and export of Iraqi oil.

No doubt the threat to US hegemony over the Persian Gulf and the region's petroleum reserves is a major factor in Washington's intransigent position.

Following last December's air war, Iraq declared it would not allow further inspections by UN weapons monitors. This effectively dealt a death blow to UNSCOM. Since then the US has insisted that Iraq allow a resumption of inspections by a revamped UN monitoring force, and has maintained its demand that Iraq prove, to the satisfaction of UN weapons inspectors, the nonexistence of nuclear, chemical and biological weapons, or the ability to make them.

This is, in principle, an impossible hurdle for Iraq to overcome, since it requires that Baghdad prove a negative. For nine years the US has blocked a significant relaxation of the sanctions by making unsubstantiated allegations of Iraqi chemical and biological weapons programs, and using UNSCOM as a tool for provocations against the

Iraqi regime.

At the same time Washington has made no secret that its real aim is the overthrow of Saddam Hussein. Last year the US Congress passed a Clinton-backed bill allocating \$97 million to finance Iraqi dissidents and intensify efforts to subvert his government.

In the current Security Council discussions, Russia and China have called for a lifting of the sanctions. France has proposed a major easing of the sanctions in return for Iraqi acceptance of a new UN weapons monitoring program. Britain and the Netherlands have put forward a proposal, backed by the US, under which Iraq would agree to a resumption of UN weapons inspections without any commitment from the UN for an easing of sanctions. According to the British-Dutch plan, there would be a 90-day test period, after which UN weapons monitors would have to certify that Iraq was complying with their inspections before a minimal relaxation of sanctions occurred.

Understandably, the Iraqis have denounced the US-backed plan as a thinly disguised framework for continuing the existing embargo. They have also expressed skepticism over the less onerous French proposal.

The actions of US officials at the opening session of the UN General Assembly have vindicated Iraqi charges that Washington is working to scuttle any easing of sanctions. As the UN conference opened September 20, US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright held a private meeting with members of the American-backed Iraqi National Congress, which is based in London. Albright then issued a statement to the General Assembly recommending these paid agents of the US government as "brave, free voices of Iraq."

The same day a senior State Department official told the press, "We are not considering any suspension of the sanctions in advance of Iraqi compliance."

In his speech to the General Assembly on September 21, Clinton singled out Iraq for attack, saying, "We cannot allow the government of Iraq to flout 40—and I say 40—successive UN Security Council resolutions, and to rebuild his arsenal."

When the British proposed a small measure to break the impasse in the Security Council over Iraqi sanctions, calling for the delegates to agree on a chairman for a new weapons inspections body before the structure of the agency had been determined, the Clinton administration refused to go along.

There is good reason to anticipate new US provocations and stepped up military aggression against Iraq. Last month a bipartisan group of Republican and Democratic senators and congressmen sent Clinton a letter denouncing him for "the continued drift" in US policy toward Baghdad. They demanded that Washington set a new deadline for Iraqi compliance with UN inspections, and called for intensified bombing and an expansion of the no-fly zones.

A senior Pentagon official subsequently told the press that since the end of the Kosovo War, the Clinton administration has been considering expanding the bombing campaign to include military targets other than air defense facilities, and widening operations to targets in central Iraq, far from the no-fly zones.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact