

Speakers at US conference condemn sanctions against Iraq

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Some 275 delegates attended a national conference the weekend of October 15-17 at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor opposing the economic sanctions and ongoing American bombing of Iraq. Speakers and panelists at the conference included civil libertarians and experts from the academic community possessing in-depth knowledge of the impact of sanctions on the Iraqi people, which by some estimates have resulted in 1.4 million deaths.

The three-day gathering, called the National Organizing Conference on Iraq, was sponsored by a coalition of religious, pacifist and Arab-American organizations. While narrow in its political aims, essentially restricted to pressuring the Democratic Party, the conference aired important information on the human toll of the sanctions and exposed the lying and hypocritical justification for the sanctions advanced by the Clinton administration.

Continuing its policy of blacking out any coverage of the impact of the American-led sanctions, the national media refused to cover the conference. The boycott extended even to the local paper, the *Ann Arbor News*, which sent a message to conference organizers declining to send a reporter to the event on the grounds that it wasn't "newsworthy."

The conference included a showing of the new film *Silent Weapon: The Embargo Against Iraq*, which contained footage recording the suffering of the Iraqi people, including interviews with healthcare workers and moving scenes of children dying from lack of essential medical supplies in Iraqi hospitals. The documentary was made by the same film crew that produced the Oscar-winning documentary *Panama Deception*.

Silent Weapon takes up the question of the "Oil for Food" program, under which the United Nations has

permitted limited amounts of food and medicine to be shipped to Iraq in exchange for the sale of oil. It noted that 27 months passed from the time of the initial agreement to the first actual shipment of food. The monthly food allotment to Iraqi families under the program is below the minimum level needed for subsistence and does not include meat or dairy products.

The film further points out the inhuman and arbitrary policies of the American and UN overseers of the program, who have blocked shipment of vital medicines and supplies on the spurious grounds that they could serve a dual civilian and military purpose. Among the medical supplies banned for sale to Iraq have been gases needed in the manufacture of anesthesia and even hypodermic needles.

Panelists at the conference included experts in fields related to assessing the economic, physical and psychological impact of sanctions. Among those attending included Dr. Peter Pellet, Professor of Nutrition at the University of Massachusetts; Dr. Talib Kafaji, a staff psychologist at St. Mary's Hospital in Detroit; and Jim Lupton, a nuclear researcher and Assistant Professor in Physics at the University of Michigan. Lupton led a panel titled "The Haunting Legacy of Depleted Uranium and Gulf War Illnesses."

An important assessment of the impact of sanctions against Iraq put in historical perspective was given by Dr. Abbas Al-nasrawi, professor of Economics at the University of Vermont. In the 1950s Dr. Al-nasrawi worked at the Ministry of Finance, the Central Bank of Iraq and the Grain Board in Baghdad.

The impact of sanctions and the eight-year war against Iran have reduced Iraq, a country once prosperous by the standards of the Middle East, to virtually the level of war- and famine-ravaged countries

in Africa.

The gross domestic product in Iraq, noted Dr. Al-nasrawi, stood at \$54 billion in 1980 at the beginning of the war against Iran. It had declined to \$27.6 billion in 1987, due to the destruction of heavy industry, the death and injury of 500,000 to 1 million soldiers and civilians and the wrecking of its oil industry. By 1998, under the impact of sanctions, GDP had declined to just \$9 billion. Per capita income now stands at less than \$400 per year.

“These figures tell the story of a society that has suffered a shift from relative affluence to poverty that has manifested itself in increased deaths ... the general disintegration of the very fabric of life,” said Dr. Al-nasrawi.

During the Gulf War the US and its allies carried out over 100,000 sorties and dropped more bombs on Iraq than fell during WWII, erasing “70 years of economic progress.”

“The extent of the damage was noted by a UN mission. ‘Nothing we had seen or read prepared us for the level of destruction we witnessed ... most means of modern life support were destroyed or rendered tenuous.’”

The effect of the sanctions against Iraq are without historical precedent, said Dr. Al-nasrawi. Exports declined from \$12 billion in 1989, before the imposition of the sanctions, to just \$351 million in 1991. Imports declined from \$10 billion in 1989 to just \$400 million in 1991. The value of the Iraqi dinar collapsed from a par of about 1 to 1 with the US dollar to 3000 to 1 by 1996.

A 1993 study of the impact of sanctions noted that the “vast majority of the population are engaged in a struggle for survival ... large numbers of Iraqis have a food intake below that of disaster-stricken African countries.”

The figures presented by Dr. Al-naswari pointed to the aim of the United States in insisting on the maintenance of sanctions: the destruction of Iraq as a modern industrial society and the prevention of its reemergence as a regional power in any way capable of challenging the interests of imperialism.

He pointed out that even if sanctions are eventually lifted or eased, Iraq will remain in the thrall of the Western banks, burdened with a staggering debt of some \$200 billion, more than 20 times its current GDP.

Just to restore its former oil producing and exporting capacity some \$30 billion in investment would be required.

In a question and answer session following his presentation Dr. Al-naswari noted the vested interest of the feudal Arab oil-producing regimes in the Middle East, particularly Saudi Arabia, in holding down Iraq. “There are joint vested interests between the US and the Saudis, that is why it has been to the advantage of the Saudis to keep the sanctions in place as long as possible.”

He pointed out that following the imposition of sanctions OPEC allotted the Saudis the bulk of Iraq's oil production quota. Largely as a result of the sanctions the Saudis were able to expand their share of OPEC production from 24 percent to more than 52 percent.

See Also:

Clinton administration blocks easing of sanctions against Iraq
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