UN aid coordinator for Iraq resigns in protest at "human tragedy" of sanctions

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The resignation of two senior United Nations officials this month, in protest against the continuation of economic sanctions on Iraq, has caused political embarrassment to the US and British governments and their policy of maintaining the embargo on the Persian Gulf nation. It has once again brought to public attention the enormous suffering being inflicted on the Iraqi people by the administrations of British Prime Minister Tony Blair and US President Bill Clinton.

Count Hans von Sponeck is a German career diplomat. He resigned his position as UN humanitarian co-ordinator in Iraq and director of the oil-for-food program on February 13. He had occupied the position since the resignation of his predecessor, Denis Halliday, a former UN assistant secretary-general, who quit the post in September 1998 under similar circumstances. Doctor Jutta Burghardt, head of the UN World Food Program in Iraq, followed von Sponeck the next day.

Sanctions were imposed on Iraq following its 1990 invasion of Kuwait. Under the terms of UN resolutions, they can only be lifted when Iraq proves to the UN Security Council that it has not only rid itself of nuclear, chemical and biological weapons and long-range missiles, but even the “capacity” to make them—an impossible task.

Von Sponeck wanted the Security Council to separate Iraq's humanitarian needs from the UN's demand for the country's disarmament. He was particularly critical of the UN oil-for-food program that allowed the Iraqi government sales of $5.2 billion every six months to help it purchase food, medicine and other essential commodities. A December UN resolution lifted the $5.2 billion cap, but von Sponeck said this was not enough.

Von Sponeck said of the sanctions, “As a UN official, I should not be expected to be silent about that which I recognise as a true human tragedy that needs to be ended. How long [should] the civilian population, which is totally innocent in all this, be exposed to such punishment for something they have never done? The very title that I hold as a humanitarian co-ordinator suggests that I cannot be silent over that which we see here. The [oil-for-food] program does not guarantee the minimum that a human being requires, which is clearly defined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. My support, my commitment is for the Iraqi people as a group of deprived people whose tragedy should end.”

He called the oil-for-food program, “a band-aid that is inadequate to end the plight of the civilian population.” He told the Qatar-based *al-Jazeerah* satellite television channel that other UN officials shared his concerns “over the inadequacy of the performance of the oil-for-food program... So I'm not at all alone in my view that we have reached a point where it is no longer acceptable that we are keeping our mouths shut.”

Von Sponeck noted that infant mortality in Iraq has more than doubled under the UN embargo. “In 1991, 56 per 1,000 children under the age of five were dying. Now, 10 years later, the figure has gone up according to UNICEF to 131 per 1,000. I keep saying every night one out of five Iraqi children under five goes to bed malnourished. We have evidence that mental disorders of children under 14 are increasing. So there is a sense of hopelessness, and can we afford, can anyone afford to associate himself or herself with such a reality? I cannot.”

Dr Burghardt's resignation from the post she assumed in January 1999 was initially attributed to unspecified “personal reasons”, but she later denied this, stating that she was quitting in solidarity with von Sponeck. “I fully support what Mr. von Sponeck is saying,” she said. The World Food Program is linked to the oil-for-food program and distributes food aid to nearly one million people.

Von Sponeck has been repeatedly attacked by the US and Britain for his criticisms of the sanctions policy and the continued bombing of the southern and northern “no-fly” zones. US and British jets patrolling the “no-fly” zones have been carrying out almost daily air strikes. Last year, von Sponeck published documents asserting that over 100 civilians had died from these attacks since December 1998. In January 1999, he visited Jumeriya the day after a US bomb killed 25 people, and in March he visited the site where another missile killed shepherds herding their sheep.

The US and Britain have pushed for von Sponeck's removal for months. US State Department spokesman James Rubin said his condemnation of the Security Council's sanctions policy and US-British bombing raids had “undermined the role of the humanitarian co-ordinator in Iraq... We do not have confidence in his leadership of this effort.” Von Sponeck has promised to present a farewell report on the devastation caused by American and British airstrikes on Iraqi territory.

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When von Sponeck's predecessor Denis Halliday resigned his post, he likened the isolation in which Iraqi children are forced to live to post-World War I Germany, from which emerged the Nazi rise to power and the Third Reich. “We are in the process of destroying an entire country. It is a simple and as terrifying as that.”

The economic blockade has already left at least one million dead, according to the UN itself. UN agencies put the figure for children's deaths at half a million. Unofficial estimates are even higher, with deaths of children alone estimated at one million.

Reports from UNICEF, the UN children's fund, say that the death rate among Iraqi children has more than doubled since international sanctions were imposed nine years ago, and that the country faces an “ongoing humanitarian emergency”. An Iraqi child dies from malnutrition, diarrhoea, leukaemia or curable infectious disease every ten minutes. Thirteen percent of Iraqi infants do not live to see their first birthday. Iraqi hospitals say they are continuously short of even the most basic medical supplies, and thousands of adults and children have died of preventable diseases. Iraqi physicians were once medical leaders of the Arab world, but have not been able to access international medical texts and journals since 1990.

Unemployment is estimated at between 60 and 75 percent. The Iraqi government currently spends just 10 per cent of what was spent on education before sanctions were imposed and has only proposed to double that figure. Prior to the imposition of sanctions, the per capita education allocation for Iraq had been $3,000. It is now $550, putting Iraq in the category of a least developed country.

The British *Economist* magazine noted in its February 12 issue, “Increased rations have helped with basic nutrition but with little else. They cannot touch the general ruin of the country after 10 years of sanctions: the scale of dilapidation is too great. For instance, the road from Baghdad to Basra reveals that the agricultural land in between has become one vast saltpan. Computer programmers and electrical engineers moonlight as taxi-drivers for want of work. Iraq's lapsed middle classes hawk rusting plumbing joints at one of Baghdad's many impromptu markets.”

The only relief allowed to the Iraqi people under the sanctions policy is provided by the oil-for-food program, which von Sponeck presided over. Under this arrangement, proceeds from oil sales are banked in New York where thirty-four percent is set aside for disbursement to outside parties with claims on Iraq, such as the Kuwait government, and to meet the costs of the UN effort in Iraq. A further 13 percent is set aside for the Kurdish autonomous area in the north.

Iraqi government agencies must first submit a list of items they wish to buy—food, medicine and infrastructure equipment. The contract then goes for review to a committee made up of representatives of the 15 members of the UN Security Council, which has the power to approve or reject contracts. According to the US State Department, over 20 percent of contracts submitted (worth about $700 million) are denied. This is mostly at the behest of the US and Britain, on the grounds that they “include items that can be used to make chemical, biological and nuclear weapons”.

A high proportion of vetoed requests contain equipment vital for the repair of water and sewage systems—$54 million out of submitted contracts worth $236 million. A quarter of power supply-related contracts submitted have also been rejected. Iraq has ordered $90 million worth of telecommunications equipment, all of which has been vetoed. UN Secretary General Kofi Annan last year accused the Clinton administration of “disrupting” humanitarian efforts by blocking the contracts.

Opposition to the continuation of sanctions has even emerged within the US political establishment. There is an anti-sanctions lobby of around 70 Democratic and Republican members of Congress. Earlier this year, Scott Ritter, formerly of the UNSCOM arms inspection team in Iraq, called for an end to sanctions and a “Marshall Plan” for Iraq. Former US Attorney General Ramsey Clark has called the sanctions a form of “genocide”, through which the “United States intended to destroy, in whole or in part, the people of Iraq”.

In addition to worries about damage to the international reputation of the US, there are growing concerns within American ruling circles that Washington's intransigence is allowing its major rivals to monopolise the potentially lucrative oil trade with Iraq. Many foreign firms and governments are looking to re-establish contacts with Iraq.

The *Economist* reports that for every truck crossing the Jordanian border with Iraq officially, the UN estimates that 20 pass without permission, while at the Turkish border—the favoured route to Europe—the ratio is 200 to one. “To pay for goods brought in this way, the Iraqi regime smuggles oil out by land and sea. In the north, the line of tankers waiting to cross the Turkish frontier is sometimes backed up for 30 kilometres (18 miles),” the *Economist* states.

Russia, which has extensive ties to the Iraqi oil industry, has consistently advocated the ending of sanctions. Germany and Japan both have plans to reopen their embassies in Baghdad. Syria has announced that it will pursue closer economic ties with Iraq, as has the United Arab Emirates.

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