

TV documentary exposes devastating toll of sanctions against Iraq

Killing the Children of Iraq—a price worth paying? written and presented by John Pilger

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The terrible cost of United Nations sanctions against Iraq was vividly brought home in *Killing the Children of Iraq—a price worth paying?* aired on Britain's ITV channel Monday, March 6. Several recent reports have recorded the growth of infant mortality, cancers and malnutrition following 10 years of sanctions. John Pilger's 90-minute film revealed the tragic human story behind the statistics.

For the first time since the West began its sanctions against Iraq in 1991, ordinary people were interviewed about the problems and difficulties they and their families confront. Pilger visited hospitals, cancer clinics, schools and downtown markets in Baghdad. He interviewed doctors, artists, teachers, parents and aid workers about the enormous increase in poverty and lack of the most basic amenities, resulting from the Gulf War and UN-imposed economic sanctions—the most comprehensive blockade of any economy in modern history.

The United Nations, US President Bill Clinton and British Prime Minister Tony Blair have all claimed that their actions against Iraq are guided by "humanitarianism"—aimed at saving the world from Saddam Hussein by preventing him from rearming his regime with "weapons of mass destruction". The documentary exposed the grotesque lies upon which this claim is based. Scott Ritter, chief UN weapons inspector from 1991 to 1998, told Pilger that all chemical, biological and nuclear weapons infrastructures and programmes had been completely dismantled or destroyed, either by his teams of Inspectors or by Iraq itself in compliance with UN demands. The real threat now posed by Iraq was "zero, none", he said.

Yet the UN, US and Britain still continue the policy of sanctions that has caused widespread chronic malnutrition and child mortality rates of 4,000 a month for those aged five and under. The documentary explained that "the US and Britain have killed more people through the imposition of sanctions against Iraq than were killed by two atomic bombs dropped on Japan in World War Two—including half a million children". One decade ago Iraq was a developed country. Now, internationally isolated and denied access to world trade, it has been "condemned to a slow death".

There has been a vast growth in the number of cancer cases since the Gulf War—one hospital shown reported a tenfold increase—but the hospitals are denied access to the necessary medicines. At one Baghdad hospital paediatrician Dr. Jinan Ghalib Hussein explained that many of the children seen in the programme would die—invariably as a result of some form of cancer, complicated by malnutrition. Before the war, Dr. Hussein said it would have been possible to save most of their lives. Since then, her hospital has faced a vast increase in referrals and a severe shortage of drugs.

Professor Karol Sikora, a former chief of the World Health Organisation's (WHO) cancer programme, explained that cancer treatment

depends on the patient receiving the right drugs at the right time. Without this, the treatment fails and the patient dies. The most vulnerable are the first to die; the elderly, young and poor have virtually no chance of survival if they fall ill in Iraq today.

Dr. Jawad Al-Ali, a cancer specialist and a member of Britain's Royal College of Physicians, was working at the same hospital. Not only were they unable to save many of the patients, he explained, but they could not even alleviate their suffering. The UN Special Committee that vetoes imports to Iraq disallows essential painkillers, such as morphine and other chemotherapy medicines. Some cancer wards have only a bottle of aspirin to share between 200 patients. Just before Christmas, the Department of Trade and Industry in London even blocked vaccines to be used against yellow fever and diphtheria, justifying this by saying they could be used to create biological weapons.

The prevalence of cancer amongst children is traced to the widespread use of weapons containing depleted uranium used by the US and Britain during the Gulf War. Professor Doug Rokke was employed to clean up Kuwait in 1991. He now has 5,000 times the recommended level of radiation in his body. He said that the "seeds of cancer" from such weapons lie throughout the region. "Contamination was extensive, casualties were grotesque," he said. The adverse health effects of depleted uranium depend on whether it is inhaled, ingested or enters the body via an open wound. It causes respiratory problems, kidney problems and cancers, depending on the amounts involved. The Atomic Committee of Iraq estimates half the population has the potential to develop cancer, yet sanctions mean that it is impossible to begin cleaning up the debris of war.

At a market in Central Baghdad, professional Iraqis sell their books to buy food for their families, or to pay for health treatment. There is a continuous downward spiral of living conditions for the majority of the population. At one school visited, the children have no chairs, desks or writing materials. An open sewer lies just outside the dilapidated building but it cannot be repaired because of the sanctions. When the sewerage rises, and seeps into the school, the children have to sit on bricks. According to one aid worker, one in every two schools in Iraq faces similar conditions.

There has been a 125 percent increase in children seeking professional help for mental health problems in the last decade. The same aid worker explained that most homes have been stripped of play materials, as families have had to sell everything except bare essentials to survive. It is not only that children have nothing to stimulate them; above all they have no hope, she said.

The title of Pilger's documentary programme refers to the answer given by US Secretary of State Madeline Albright when she was questioned whether the lives of half a million Iraqi children was a "price worth

paying" to target Saddam Hussein. She replied, "We think the price is worth it."

Peter van Walsum, chairman of the UN Sanctions Committee, told Pilger that sanctions are a coercive measure, just short of military action. He likened them to a military action that can create "collateral damage" (i.e., civilian deaths). In downtown Baghdad, well-stocked clinics and shops used by the regime and the wealthy were shown. "Sanctions have not hurt them in the slightest," Pilger said.

Asked about Albright's comment on the deaths of half a million Iraqi children, US State Department spokesman James Rubin dismissed the statistics. The figures were derived by a methodology "we [the US] don't accept," he said. Organisations were using "dubious methods" to arrive at such figures, he continued, even though it was pointed out that the data had been compiled by the World Health Organisation.

Unwittingly, Rubin contradicted the US and Britain's claims to be the defenders of human rights in the Middle East. "When making policy one has to choose between two bad choices, not a best choice and a bad choice," he said, "and unfortunately, the effect of sanctions has been more than we would have hoped." Later on he attacked those UN representatives who had spoken out against the continuation of sanctions. "The chief humanitarian co-ordinator's job is not to second guess the Security Council's decisions about international peace and security—that is the Security Council's job. We believe the world would be more dangerous if some of the humanitarians' views were accepted by the Security Council," Rubin stated.

Rubin was referring to the two former UN humanitarian co-ordinators who appeared during the programme. Dennis Halliday resigned in 1998 in protest at sanctions he said were "destroying a whole society". His successor, Hans von Sponeck, resigned on February 13 this year because he could "no longer tolerate the suffering caused by sanctions". Two days later, the head of the UN food programme in Iraq also resigned.

British officials interviewed were somewhat more nervous than Rubin about publicly defending sanctions on the programme. Foreign Secretary Robin Cook declined requests to be interviewed, saying that he did not want to "appear in a film with 'dying babies'". The Foreign Office effectively demanded editorial control of the programme before they would agree to be filmed. If they were to appear, they insisted on being given an exclusive preview of the programme and inserting a 10-minute, uncut contribution by Cook that had to be shown at the end. Pilger refused to accept their conditions.

The bombing of Iraq continues. The documentary pointed out that between May 1998 and January 2000 US air and navy forces have carried out 36,000 sorties over southern Iraq, including 24,000 combat missions. All these took place outside the parameters of international law and the UN, Pilger said. In Westminster, Blair claimed that the sorties represented "vital humanitarian tasks to protect the people". Journalist Felicity Arbuthnot explained how one such attack had wiped out six family members—including four children—who were tending sheep. The children's uncle was interviewed, but their mother declined, saying she only wanted to speak to the pilot who had killed her children.

What of US claims that their actions were aimed at encouraging a democratic opposition to come forward in Iraq? In February 1991, President George Bush had called on the Iraqi people to "rise up", Pilger recalled. By March 5, Hussein's hold over southern Iraq had virtually collapsed, and rebellion had spread to Basra, Iraq's second largest city. The documentary showed videotape shot in Kebala in March, secretly recorded by soldiers participating in the uprising. It was quickly crushed after the US did everything they possibly could—short of actively intervening—to ensure its failure. An adviser to Bush was quoted, explaining that the "US could not allow the overthrow of Saddam Hussein without knowing that his replacement would support American policy".

"Is there another agenda" behind the US and Britain's actions? Pilger

asked. He briefly reviewed US and British involvement in the Middle East, aimed at safeguarding their own interests in this oil-rich region. The CIA had created the Iraqi regime, Pilger explained. As one CIA official put it, Saddam may be a "son of a bitch, but he is our son of a bitch". Reagan, Bush and Thatcher had all courted Hussein, supplying his regime with electronics, chemicals, trade, etc.

There was "no point of principle, no human rights to protect" in their subsequent actions against Iraq, Pilger stated. "Smashing Iraq gives the US greater control over the Middle East as the West expands a vast new oil protectorate stretching from the Persian Gulf to the former Soviet Union. Iraq may well be the blueprint for policing this new order with the weapons of sanctions and bombing." A germane point, especially given the US-led bombardment of Serbia in March last year, and its leading role in the imposition of sanctions and the establishment of protectorates across the Balkans, a region strategically sited next to the former USSR and the oil-rich Caucasus.

Pilger opposed the 1999 war against Serbia, just as he had the war against Iraq in 1991. There are very few leading journalists today that could have produced such a hard-hitting documentary, and for this he deserves recognition. But whilst he can identify the machinations of the US, Britain and other Great Powers, he continues to hold out the illusion that imperialism can be made truly "humane".

Pilger ended the documentary by saying, "we must reclaim the United Nations". This standpoint is shared by a section of the Labour Party left in Britain, who claim that the UN has been hijacked by America. If only its hold were loosened, the UN would be able to get on with its job of promoting world peace and harmony, they argue. This ignores the fact that the war against Iraq was supported by every major European country—each concerned with advancing its own national interests under the guise of "human rights"—as well as most of the Arab regimes and other undeveloped countries. It was this international consensus that enabled the war to be fought under a UN mandate and sanctions to be implemented.

Nonetheless, the coalition that was assembled between the major powers against Iraq in 1991 is clearly under strain today. The belligerence of the US and the European Union's efforts to assert their own economic and military agenda has led to open disagreements. In December 1999, France joined Russia and China in opposing the continued impositions of sanctions on Iraq, leaving only Britain and the US as Security Council permanent members in favour of the measures. Even the Arab countries that had collaborated with the West against Iraq are now calling for an end to sanctions.

Such divisions are a cause for concern in official circles that the West's actions will backfire. The British *Guardian* of March 8 editorialised: "Nearly 10 years on, Saddam Hussein is finally winning the Gulf war." The unity of Western and Arab opinion had evaporated, they continued, leaving America and Britain almost alone. Their concern is that Britain will get caught up in the growing backlash against the US, and should extricate itself quickly.

Laith Kubba, a member of the Iraqi "Opposition in Exile" backed by the West, spoke on the documentary. But Kubba expressed dismay that the West's current policy was not working. Iraq should not be ruined and its people killed on such a scale, on the pretext of denying Hussein the ability to make "weapons of mass destruction," he said. Sanctions have intensified opposition to imperialism in Iraq making it very difficult for pro-Western forces to attract political support.

The fact that a documentary so openly critical of British foreign policy was screened reflects these ongoing disagreements. The participation of leading government officials and UN personnel in the programme indicates that these conflicts go right to the top.



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