

# Meeting on Iraq sanctions describes horrors inflicted by US and allies

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Arab-American organizations, religious-pacifist groups and academics participated in a panel discussion April 9 in Detroit, Michigan on the impact of the US-led sanctions against Iraq that have resulted in the deaths of hundreds of thousands of people, mainly children.

Despite the presence of a substantial panel, including academic experts and prominent members of the Arab-American community, the meeting was boycotted by the news media. The silence of the press continues the policy of suppressing reports on Iraq to hide from the American people the terrible suffering being inflicted on civilians by the US government and its allies.

The meeting featured a showing of part of the documentary by British journalist John Pilger, *Killing the children of Iraq—a price worth paying?* The documentary recently aired on British television and presents a devastating exposure of the “humanitarian” pretensions of the regimes of US President Bill Clinton and British Prime Minister Tony Blair.

During the panel discussion a psychologist from the University of Michigan recounted experiences from a visit to Iraq he made last August and September. Among the stops on his trip was the southern Iraq city of Basra. “I confirmed a picture of deteriorating physical and mental health.” He reported that one-third of Iraqi children are malnourished and 13 percent of Iraqi babies die within the first year.

“The medical system in Iraq, which was once one of the best in the Middle East, is now in worse condition than in most Third World countries. There are minimal antibiotics, and these are shared equally, insuring that no one gets an adequate dose. There is a lack of parts for air conditioning in hospitals. I was in emergency rooms that were 100 degrees. Blood cannot be stored due to a lack of plastic bags. Surgical gloves are

washed with contaminated water and reused again and again until they are worn out. Iraqi doctors, who are very dedicated, have been without access to updated medical journals or texts since 1990.”

He reported that because of the lack of medicine and basic medical supplies surgical procedures have been reduced by 75 percent. Some are performed without anesthetic.

He noted that leukemia and congenital abnormalities have increased dramatically, possibly as a consequence of exposure to depleted uranium from the weapons that rained down on Iraq during the Gulf War. Furthermore, there has been a growth in mental health disorders, including in particular those related to stress. Social breakdown is evident in the form of increased theft and vagrancy.

Vicky Rob, a relief worker with the aid organization “Life for Relief and Development,” told of the devastating fall in the standard of living for the Iraqi population due to the impact of sanctions. “The Oil for Food program has been a failure from the start. Contracts may take months to approve.”

She reported that much of the infrastructure in Iraq has not been repaired. “A multi-tiered bureaucracy must approve any exports. The UN does not allow the repair or upgrading of schools or clinics.... Today Iraq is the poorest country in the world. One kilo of meat is 1500 dinars. The average salary of an Iraqi is 4000 dinars per month. The cheapest pair of pants for a child is 4000 dinars. Clothing is a luxury.”

Dr. Hikmet Jamil, MD, PhD, a health consultant for the Arab Community Center for Economic and Social Services and a member of the Wayne State University faculty in Detroit, reported that the Iraqi people were exposed to about 630,000 pounds of depleted uranium weapons during the Gulf War. A pilot study he

conducted on Iraqi refugees who emigrated to the United States after the Gulf War found that congenital anomalies and mental disorders in this group were much higher than among immigrants from other Arab countries. Sixty percent of the Iraqi immigrants in the study suffered from depression and 24 percent suffered more serious mental disorders; 74 percent suffered from respiratory problems.

Following the meeting Dr. Jamil told the WWSWS, “Before 1997 I was a professor in the medical school in Baghdad. There has been a dramatic change in the trend of disease and cancer, specifically leukemia in children, since 1994-95.

“I myself was exposed to depleted uranium. After the war I treated soldiers who brought back empty shell casings and gave them to us as souvenirs. We didn’t know that we were exposing ourselves to uranium. Kids were playing with these things. In the south of Iraq, where there were major battles, the exposure was unbelievable.

“I will give a good example of how the impact of the sanctions on the infrastructure of Iraq could be seen. You go to a teaching hospital. Say you found in a ward 16 to 20 patients; if six needed an injection, they would have to inject all six with one needle, without sterilization, because the sterilization equipment isn’t working. That is only one simple example.

“Between 1989 and 1997 there has been a 100 percent increase in the cases of malignant cancer in Iraq. There has been a 14 percent increase in renal diseases and a 13 percent increase in cardiac diseases.”

“In 1998 I returned to Iraq for two weeks to give a talk on the research I was doing in the United States. There has been a long-term impact of the Gulf War on the Iraqi people. I did studies among Iraqi refugees living in the United States. They are still complaining of what is called Gulf War Syndrome. This is only a pilot study. I am still seeking funding for a major study.”

While those addressing the gathering described the horrors inflicted on the Iraqi population by US imperialism, the general political orientation of those organizing the town hall meeting is to apply pressure on the Democratic Party and the Clinton administration. This is the same regime which continues to bomb Iraq almost daily, and has overseen the extermination by disease and malnutrition of some

500,000 Iraqi men, women and children for the sake of American geopolitical interests.

The meeting was chaired by Congressman John Conyers, Democrat from Detroit, who has sought to divert opposition to the sanctions into the dead end of appeals to the conscience of Clinton and Secretary of State Madeleine Albright.

In the face of mounting international revulsion over the sanctions, Conyers recently cosponsored, along with a handful of liberal House members, a bill that would modify the current sanction policies of the Clinton administration. The bill, which has no chance of passing, would not end the suffering of the people of Iraq. The proposed legislation would lift the embargo on medical and food supplies. However, it would maintain the existing ban on spare parts needed for restoring Iraq’s water purification system, electrical grids and other vital infrastructures. The bill also stipulates that food and medicine exports to Iraq be subject to review for “potential threats to the national security of the United States.” The UN committee overseeing the sanctions has routinely banned the shipment of many medical supplies, such as syringes, on the grounds that they have a potential military use.

The measure also does not address the question of how Iraq would pay for additional imports of food and medicine. The current restrictions imposed by the so-called Oil for Food program limit the amount of oil Iraq can export and earmarks a large part of its oil revenue for reparation payments to Kuwait and administrative costs.



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