

# Ten years since the Gulf War—US and Britain insist sanctions continue against Iraq

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On January 16, 1991 at 23.30 GMT a US-led coalition of the major imperialist powers began a devastating aerial bombardment of Iraq and its people. Washington claimed at the time that its actions were justified by Iraq's invasion of Kuwait on August 2, 1990 and the need to uphold the “right to self-determination” of this oil-rich sheikdom.

In reality, the US had cynically encouraged Iraq's incursion into Kuwait in order to establish a pretext to implement longstanding plans to seize control of the Persian Gulf and its vast oil reserves. Utilising its military and technological superiority, the US sought to demonstrate its pre-eminent role in the “New World Order” to be established in the wake of the collapse of the Soviet bloc.

Over the course of 43 days, warplanes dropped 80,000 cluster bombs containing 16 million anti-personnel “bomblets”. US forces fired an estimated 944,000 rounds of radioactive depleted uranium (DU) ammunition on Iraq and Kuwait. Iraq's schools, hospitals, industry and infrastructure were severely damaged, tens of thousands of innocent civilians terrorised and killed, and air and water supplies polluted.

However, many more people have died in the war's aftermath, as the decade-long sanctions imposed by the United Nations have prevented Iraq from gaining access to desperately needed food and medical supplies. Under the oil-for-food programme, all trade contracts with Iraq have to first be authorised by the UN. The UN also controls the proceeds from the oil-for-food programme, deducting 25 percent for its own coffers under a so-called “compensation programme”.

According to the Iraqi Health Ministry there has been a fourfold increase in the incidence of leukaemia since the Gulf War. The estimate, which is accepted by the

World Health Organisation (WHO), is backed up by eyewitness reports from aid workers and professionals. The disease is particularly concentrated in southern Iraq, where the US-led onslaught was most aggressive. Overall cancer rates are 4.6 times higher in the south, and wives of Iraqi Gulf War veterans are three times more likely to suffer miscarriages than the Iraqi average.

Doctors report hospital wards filled with young children dying from leukaemia. The mortality rate for the disease and other cancers is 100 percent, as Iraqi hospitals do not have the necessary drugs and equipment to carry out treatment—delayed for months, or even banned, under the UN embargo. In an interview with the BBC, the WHO's Baghdad representative, Dr. Ghulam Popal, said, “I suspect that this depleted uranium is one of the causes of this leukaemia.”

Extreme and widespread poverty has facilitated the spread of such diseases. Teachers, civil servants and many other professionals earn just 50 pence (\$0.75) a week. Many people have been forced to sell their belongings to pay for scarce medicines, and even food. Malnutrition levels have risen greatly, so that 108 of every 1,000 babies born die before their first birthday.

Such levels of deprivation have led to growing revulsion at Western sanctions. In the past years several leading former US and UN officials have publicly opposed the Iraqi sanctions—including Denis Halliday, former UN assistant secretary-general; Scott Ritter, former UN weapons inspector in Iraq; and Count Hans von Sponeck, UN humanitarian coordinator in Iraq.

On Tuesday, protesters gathered in London, New York and other cities to demand the lifting of sanctions. In London, Labour MP Tony Benn described the embargo as tantamount to a “war crime” against the Iraqi people. Meanwhile in Baghdad, a group of 70

American activists led by former US Attorney General Ramsey Clark delivered aid in defiance of the UN sanctions.

Ten years on, many of those countries that originally participated in the Gulf War have also called for the lifting of sanctions. The demands by France, Russia and others are motivated by concern that the West's actions have failed to displace Saddam Hussein. Washington's insistence that sanctions remain and bombings continue so long as Hussein remained in power were aimed at garnering support for Western-backed Iraqi opposition forces, preparing the grounds for a coup or assassination attempt. Instead, Hussein has used the dire conditions within the country to strengthen his dictatorial rule. At the same time, sanctions have increased anti-Western sentiment across the Middle East. Speaking before Tuesday's rally, Benn complained, "We are still bombing and Saddam is still there."

The European powers in particular are concerned at the consequences of American domination in the region. The number of countries openly defying sanctions is growing and the number of "humanitarian aid" flights into Baghdad has increased in recent months. There are reports that several major oil companies are anxious to commence business with Iraq, and are competing to win multimillion-dollar contracts to begin refitting Iraq's oil industry.

In the last months Iraq halted oil supplies in a bid to break the sanctions. In a televised address to mark the tenth anniversary of the war, Hussein made pointed reference to the splits that had emerged in the Gulf coalition, claiming that Iraq had succeeded in breaking out of its international isolation. Many of the Arab regimes, whose acquiescence played such a critical role in enabling the original onslaught against Iraq, are now severely politically compromised in the face of the Arab masses. Fearing for their own rule, they have added their voices to calls to end the embargo.

Despite being isolated within the UN, the US—with British backing—seems determined to continue its aggression in the Middle East. For the past three years, the US and Britain have enforced a strict "no-fly zone" over northern and southern Iraq, in violation of Iraqi sovereignty, and conducted almost weekly bombing raids. More than 300 people have been killed and 900 injured as a result of these actions.

Even prior to the November US presidential election, the Clinton administration had signalled that it was considering a renewed military offensive against Iraq. But US provocations seem guaranteed by the accession to the White House of George W. Bush, the son of the man who launched the original Gulf War, and Dick Cheney, the incoming vice president who was secretary of defense during the war. Even before Bush's formal inauguration, the incoming Republican administration has spoken belligerently about tightening sanctions. Incoming Secretary of State Colin Powell—chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff for US forces during the Persian Gulf War—complained that the embargo had been undermined and insisted that sanctions needed to be "re-energised".

The embargo would continue until Iraq allowed UN weapons inspectors back into the country and met its obligations to the UN, Powell stipulated. This is despite substantive evidence that the US had used such inspections as a front for CIA intelligence gathering against the Iraqi leadership. According to Washington, Iraq must prove to the UN Security Council that it has not only rid itself of nuclear, chemical and biological weapons and long-range missiles (so-called "weapons of mass destruction"), but even the "capacity" to produce them—an impossible task.

Questions as to whether the change in US administration would force the Blair Labour government to reconsider British policy towards Iraq were also dispelled on Tuesday, as all the main parties insisted the embargo should continue. British Foreign Office Minister Peter Hain even claimed that the sanctions had a "humanitarian" objective.



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