

Medical experts warn of devastating impact of US war vs. Iraq

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A new report by Medact, an organisation of medical experts, predicts a nightmare scenario of possibly millions of deaths, human suffering and infrastructure collapse if the United States once again goes to war against Iraq.

Medact's report is entitled *Collateral Damage: the health and environmental costs of war on Iraq*. It explains how in the event of the Bush administration utilising nuclear weapons in their effort to subjugate Iraq, as many as four million Iraqi civilians could be killed.

Before the last Persian Gulf War 11 years ago, the Baathist regime was threatened with nuclear retaliation if it attacked Israel with chemical weapons. Should the forthcoming war threaten to become a drawn out affair, the American and the British governments have already expressed a willingness to use pre-emptive nuclear strikes.

Even a conflict rapidly won by American forces, fought only with conventional weapons, could cause half a million deaths and leave behind a deadly legacy of ill health and environmental damage in Iraq and the wider Persian Gulf region. Medact predict that the total possible deaths on all sides during the conflict and the following three months could range from 48,000 to over a quarter of a million. An outbreak of civil war between competing factions and ethnic groups would lead to a further 20,000 deaths. The adverse affects of a war upon the population could add a further 200,000 deaths, while a further 200,000 lives would be threatened after the conflict.

Any war would leave an aftermath of civil conflict, famine and epidemics, legions of refugees, a disastrous impact on children's health and the destruction of manufacturing and agriculture. Needless to say a war waged on Iraq utilising nuclear weapons would render

not only the capital, but also surrounding areas uninhabitable for years to come.

Medact point out that the avowed goal of removing Saddam Hussein and his Baathist regime will necessitate a far wider war than the removal of Iraqi forces from Kuwait in 1991. It will in all probability involve sustained air attacks on major Iraqi urban centres. The report also factors in the probability of an attack upon Iraq triggering the downfall of regimes in surrounding nations and acting as a catalyst for retaliatory action by Islamic fundamentalists. Even a swift slaughter of the Iraqi army, the so-called "best case" scenario, will threaten the county's Balkanisation, between Sunni and Shia groups and between Arabs, Kurds, Turkmen and Assyrians. Such a conflict will rapidly spread beyond the borders of Iraq and destabilise surrounding countries.

The stuttering world economy would be tipped into a deep and prolonged recession, while the ripple effects of oil price hikes and trade reduction would have a disastrous effect upon the less developed nations.

The financial cost of a conventional war on Iraq will be huge. The American government will spend \$150 billion to \$200 billion on a conventional war and a further \$5 billion to \$20 billion on the subsequent occupation of Iraq. Just half the cost of an initial war—\$100 billion, or between one and two percent of America's GDP—would fund four years of expenditure addressing the health requirements of the world's poorest people.

In the latest edition of *New York Review*, William Nordhaus, an economics professor at Yale University, insists that the longer-term costs of the war are being underestimated by Medact and others. After examining recent international experiences in post war Kosovo and Haiti, the longer-term cost could amount to as

much as \$600 billion. Nordhaus's worst case scenario, including oil price spikes and OPEC intransigence envisages costs of as much as \$1.6 trillion.

The Medact report places its possible future scenarios in the context of the war of attrition that has been waged against Iraq for over a decade. In doing so they note in passing how Iraq's fate has been all but ignored by the world's media. In the introduction the authors explain how their research was hampered by a lack of contemporary research and data: "More than a decade into one of the major humanitarian disasters of our time, we are left to debate causes and responsibilities without an adequate information base."

The Iraqi population has been subjected to devastating economic sanctions. It is estimated that one and a half million Iraqi citizens have perished as a result.

The Medact authors point out how during the 1970s Iraq developed from an impoverished, predominantly rural society, into one that was highly urbanised with a relatively modern social infrastructure. Today the population is impoverished, its infrastructure has been wrecked and the country's infant mortality is the 37th worst in the world—on a par with countries like Haiti, the poorest nation in the Western hemisphere, and the Yemen, the poorest member of the Arab league.

Iraq has plummeted down the United Nations Human Development Index. Before its defeat in the first Gulf War, in 1990, Iraq was positioned in 50th place. By 2000 it had fallen to 126th. By way of comparison Iran is 95th.

Iraqi civilian infrastructure was deliberately targeted during the first Gulf war, with devastating consequences. Its oil industry, roads, bridges, communications, electricity supplies, water and sewage systems, factories, warehouses and civilian homes were systematically destroyed by ordnance. Declassified documents from the US Defence Intelligence Agency explain how a conscious policy was implemented to destroy electricity generating facilities, together with water storage and treatment amenities. Then to exacerbate the impact on the Iraqi population, chlorine was placed on the UN embargo list. The predictable result has been a series of devastating famines and epidemics.

Iraq had a GDP of \$66 billion in 1989. By 1992 it had shrunk by 270 times to a tiny \$245 million.

The UN estimated in the late 1990s that 55 percent of Iraqis live in poverty and 20 percent in extreme poverty. The most vulnerable sections of society including children, pregnant women, older people and the sick, have been hit most severely by sanctions. In response to reports that half a million children had died due to shortages created by sanctions, Madeleine Albright, then secretary of state in the Clinton administration, famously described this as "a price worth paying."

The oil for food programme, which permits Iraq to sell oil to fund relief, only began in 1997. It is widely disparaged as vastly inferior to conventional relief programmes. In addition, the US and Britain declared no fly zones in the north and south of Iraq along the 33rd and 36th parallels. Between 1991 and 1999, 6,000 sorties dropped 1,800 bombs and hit in excess of 450 targets in those zones. These attacks have recently increased in frequency to destroy any remaining Iraqi air defence facilities and provoke retaliatory action that would provide a possible excuse for an all out attack. Notwithstanding the West's professed humanitarian concern for the suppressed Iraqi Kurds, the Turkish air force is now allowed to enter Iraqi airspace and bomb Kurdish villages inside the Northern zone.



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