

UN report details humanitarian disaster expected from war vs. Iraq

Chris Talbot
13 January 2003

A United Nations report marked “Strictly Confidential” and dated December 10, 2002, spells out in harrowing detail the likely humanitarian consequences of US-led war against Iraq.

Compiled by UN planners, the report makes clear that unlike the attack on Iraq in 1991, which it describes as a “relatively short, aerial bombardment of infrastructure, towns and cities”, the western powers are now planning “potentially a large scale and protracted ground offensive, supported by aerial and conventional bombardment.” [para 1]

Consequently, the potential devastation will be far greater than in 1991, it reports. Whereas a majority of the population of 26.5 million at that time had family members in work and access to cash and material assets, this is no longer the case.

Neither does the report consider it valid to make a comparison with the result of the recent war in Afghanistan where the population is predominantly rural and used to being “more self-reliant”. In Iraq the people are largely urbanised and under the sanctions regime imposed after 1991 have “become even more reliant on the state to meet their basic needs” [para 3] with “some 60 percent of the population (16 million) highly dependent” [para 11] on the monthly “food basket” from the government.

Because of the possibility of a lengthy conflict, humanitarian access “would either be denied by one or other of the protagonists or severely hampered by security or safety concerns” [para 1]. The result will be unimaginably dire in a situation where the infrastructure on which the population are so dependent for government supplies—electricity network, railway system, roads, bridges and ports—will be, in the report’s terminology, “seriously degraded”.

The draft report, with a number of deletions

presumably to protect the source inside the UN, was passed on to the Campaign Against Sanctions on Iraq (CASI), based in Cambridge, England. CASI released it in a press release dated January 7 and it is available on their website [<http://www.casi.org.uk/info/undocs/war021210.html>].

While the report’s opening sentence says war is “not inevitable”, the underlying assumption is that the UN needs to prepare for a very large-scale humanitarian disaster. There is no indication that this is only a “worst-case scenario” and only contingency planning is involved. Rather, the report indicates that UN officials have knowledge of US military planning.

The UN report predicts:

* “in the early stages there will be a large segment of the population requiring treatment for traumatic injuries” and “as many as 500,000 people could require treatment to a greater or lesser degree as a result of direct or indirect injuries”. [para 23] A footnote explains this is based on World Health Organisation estimates of 100,000 direct and 400,000 indirect casualties.

* * “in the likely absence of a functioning primary health care system in a post-conflict situation” that those particularly affected in the south and central regions will be 4.2 million under five-year-olds, one million pregnant and lactating women, two million internally displaced persons, and an unknown number of infirm, chronically ill and elderly. [para 24]

* “It is estimated that the nutritional status of some 3.03 million people countrywide will be dire and that they will require therapeutic feeding [according to UNICEF estimates]. This consists of 2.03 million severely and moderately malnourished children under five and one million pregnant women.” [para 27]

* “Damage to the electricity network will result in

collateral reductions in capacity in all sections, particularly water and sanitation as well as health.” As a result “39 percent of the population will need to be provided with potable water.” [para 28]

* “It is estimated that there will eventually be some 900,000 Iraqi refugees requiring assistance, of which 100,000 will be in need of immediate assistance”. [para 35]

It is notable that none of the major English language news sources have so far taken up the press release. This is in line with the self-censorship and uncritical government support witnessed in the US media and much of the British press during the military build-up over the last months.

The US media functions increasingly as the propaganda arm of the Bush administration and the Pentagon. It has a vested interest in suppressing the UN’s grim predictions, which are so clearly at odds with the official argument that civilian deaths will be kept to a minimum and that large-scale war casualties can be avoided. President George W. Bush’s recent announcement that there will be a “sweeping transition to democracy in Iraq” is shown to be a ridiculous lie considering the scale of devastation envisaged by the UN experts.

In Britain only the *Daily Mirror* carried a very brief report. In fact, details of the emergency UN plans, including this draft report, have apparently been available to the media for at least two weeks. A short article—cited on the CASI website entitled “UN chief issues secret orders for war in Iraq”—appeared in the Rupert Murdoch-owned British *Times* newspaper of December 23, 2002. The article, clearly referring to some of the report’s contents as well as other UN “internal documents”, makes clear that the order for secret preparations came from UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan.

Since CASI is a British-based group it is perhaps more surprising that the UN report has received so little coverage in the British media. The explanation lies in the argument repeatedly put forward by the British government and supported in the media that Prime Minister Tony Blair has persuaded the US of the need to obtain international support for the war on Iraq through the UN.

The report—the product of top-level secret discussions within the UN—fly in the face of such claims that the

body represents an “international community” which has any say in the conduct of the war. Rather, it demonstrates that the UN will play the role that the US expects it to—organising aid after American-led forces have destroyed Iraq’s infrastructure, flattened its cities, and killed or injured thousands of its population. Kofi Annan and UN officials are already planning and organising aid for the devastating war and UN officials have already held discussions with the European Union to fund its relief efforts.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact