Britain: Charities warn 11 million Iraqis face starvation in event of war

Julie Hyland
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Some 11 million people would be at immediate risk of starvation if the US proceeds with its war on Iraq, leading aid charities in the UK have warned.

In a briefing for MPs in the House of Commons on March 12, Care International, Christian Aid and Save the Children warned that military action could push 60 percent of Iraqis to the brink of starvation. Almost half of Iraq's population is aged below 14 years.

Raja Jarrah, programme director of Care International UK, said war would cause chaos to transport, fuel and energy supplies and severely disrupt the food ration system.

The implementation of United Nations sanctions over the past 12 years has meant that 60 percent of the Iraq population is dependent upon the government for food aid. These people would immediately "face hunger, if not starvation" in the event of war. Distribution of food aid via the 45,000 outlets across Iraq would almost certainly grind to a halt, especially as UN officials are withdrawn in advance of the bombing. Although the Iraqi government doubled food rations last month, aid agencies say poverty has meant many of the poorest families have sold some of it.

Jarrah explained, "About 90 percent of Iraq's sewage treatment stations are vulnerable if the electricity goes down, leading to polluted drinking water and dire public health consequences.

"Whilst we can't predict the exact consequences of war, we can predict that they will be dire and, for many households, catastrophic."

He warned that there was "no evidence" that the world was "prepared for that scale of disaster".

The charities, which provide humanitarian assistance within Iraq, said many people's living conditions were already so fragile that they would not be able to cope with any further deterioration.

CARE International had previously reported, "The Iraqi people are already living through a terrible emergency. They do not have the resources to withstand an additional crisis brought about by military action."

In a briefing before UN Security Council members in January, Margaret Hassan, Director of CARE Iraq, reported that for more than a decade the country has been suffering a humanitarian crisis in food, water, health care and education.

As a consequence of the 1991 war and UN sanctions, chronic malnutrition among children under five years has soared from 18.7 percent in 1991 to 30 percent in 2000 and infant mortality has risen by 166 percent. One-third of all children no longer attend school. Electricity, essential for many services, is available for less than 12 hours a day in many areas of the country, whilst half a million tonnes of raw sewage is discharged daily into water sources—300,000 tonnes in Baghdad.

The agency has said that if military action goes ahead, in addition to immediate food shortages, 39 percent of the population will have no access to clean water, and 5 million will lack access to health care.

Giving evidence on behalf of Save the Children, director general Mike Aaronson said food aid currently distributed to 16 million people would be cut off during military action. Yet there "is little evidence that government and international agencies are addressing how they will ensure people are fed during and after a war, and how they will ensure access to clean water and other health essentials".

Kurds in Northern Iraq would be greatly affected. Save the Children estimate that 60 percent of the Kurdish population live in poverty on average incomes of $3-6 a day. Baghdad currently supplies monthly food rations to the north, which is almost entirely dependent on outside assistance to meet its requirements.

"Conflict in Northern Iraq's highly urbanised population would interrupt food supplies and cut

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electricity, water and sanitation, which could result in displacement on a very large scale and separating children from their families," Rob MacGillivray, Save the Children UK's regional emergencies adviser, has said. "If prompt humanitarian assistance cannot be delivered in accordance with refugee status, the situation could become life threatening. Access to remote mountainous areas is difficult, especially in winter. Fuel is already in short supply and private food stocks will run low in winter."

The agency warns that "Iraqis living in south and central Iraq are even worse off." Military intervention would greatly exacerbate the humanitarian crisis in Iraq and push the population "over the edge", it reported.

The UN predicts that 2 million people could be made homeless by a war, many of whom are expected to try to flee the country. Half a million would be displaced within Iraq itself, and are likely to seek refuge in Kurdish-controlled northern Iraq.

Aid agencies report that there are virtually no facilities to cope with such numbers and that UN attempts to stockpile food and medicines in the event of war are way behind schedule.

A World Food Programme appeal for $23 million to fund "an initial contingency plan" that would provide meagre rations for 900,000 people over 10 weeks is also far behind target—having received just $7.5 million. The children's charity UNHCR has reported it has received just $16.3 million in aid out of a required $60 million.

American and British claims to be acting in the best interests of the Iraqi people in pressing ahead with plans to militarily enforce "regime change" were "desperately incompatible" with the situation that would face millions as a consequence of war, the UK charities warned.

Without a UN mandate, humanitarian efforts would be made even harder. "We don't want to be seen as handmaidens of belligerent governments and without a UN mandate for the war we would find it hard to take money from the US or British governments," Will Day, chief executive of Care International UK, has said.

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