

US invasion produces human catastrophe in Iraq

Jerry Isaacs
5 May 2003

An unprecedented social calamity is confronting the Iraqi people as a result of the US invasion and the widespread looting that followed the removal of the Baghdad government. Virtually every element of the civilian infrastructure—electrical and water supply, telecommunications, health care, schools, transportation, even the financial system—has broken down, threatening the country's 24 million people with the spread of infectious diseases, hunger and more death.

At least 3,500 civilians were killed and another 6,000 injured by American bombs, missiles and ground attacks during the three-week war. Tens of thousands of Iraqi soldiers—the bulk of them young conscripts—were also killed, although the number may never be known because the US refuses to present even an estimate of Iraqi casualties, civilian or military.

In addition to the casualties, the US attacks destroyed or damaged hundreds of homes, workplaces and government offices involved in food distribution and other civil affairs. Severe damage was also done to power generators and water plants leaving much of the population in Baghdad, Basra and other cities without operating pumps that remove sewage and circulate fresh water.

A desperate situation existed even before the war due to 12 years of US-led economic sanctions, which blocked the import of chlorine for water purification, lead for pencils, seeds, fertilizers and many medical supplies on the grounds they could be used to produce weapons of mass destruction. Eighty-five percent of Iraqis had no regular employment, 800,000 of Iraq's 13 million children were malnourished and less than half of the population (41 percent) had regular access to clean water.

The war deeply exacerbated this already desperate situation. On May 2 eight international relief agencies issued a joint statement, declaring that much of the Iraqi population now faced a "critical" situation.

"Already under severe strain and under-resourced before the war began, hospitals, water plants and sewerage systems have been crippled by the conflict and the looting," said the statement, signed by among others, the directors of Oxfam, Save the Children in Britain, Islamic Relief and the Catholic Fund for Overseas Development (Cafod). "Hospitals are overwhelmed, diarrhea is endemic and the death toll is mounting. Medical staff are working for free, but cannot continue for long. Rubbish, including medical waste, is piling up. Clean water is scarce and diseases like typhoid are being reported in southern Iraq."

The statement noted that newly armed militia groups were

forcing civilians to flee their homes and were offering "protection" against looting for hospitals. The statement warned of the danger of the outbreak of ethnic, tribal and religious violence that could imperil thousands of civilians.

"Unless comprehensive action is taken now by the occupying forces to ensure security and the orderly delivery of humanitarian assistance based on need—which is a requirement under the Geneva conventions—this already acute situation will only worsen."

The statement concluded by calling on US authorities to hand over reconstruction efforts to the United Nations, noting that many of the countries neighboring Iraq had already called for the US to pull out of the country and allow the UN to help form a new government.

The White House has steadfastly opposed any such measures and instead has directly blocked humanitarian aid from agencies connected to the UN or the European Union. Last Friday, US authorities refused to allow a Belgian aircraft, loaded with vaccines, ante-natal care equipment and operating tables, to land in Baghdad, citing security concerns. The action was widely interpreted as an attempt to punish the Belgian government, which had opposed the US war.

Last month, US military forces also stopped a humanitarian flight headed to the northern city of Irbil. The plane, filled with enough medical supplies to help 40,000 people for three months, was also told not to land because of supposed security concerns. A spokesman for the British aid agency Save the Children UK, which has operated in northern Iraq for 12 years, repudiated the claims, saying the city was "as safe as many parts of London." Brendan Paddy told the BBC, "I can only guess they have other priorities because the suggestion that it is not safe is very difficult to accept."

US officials have barely acknowledged the social catastrophe in Iraq. The main preoccupation of the Bush administration has been seizing Iraq's oil resources, securing lucrative "reconstruction" contracts for US companies closely tied to the White House and suppressing the growing number of Iraqi demonstrations demanding an end to the US occupation.

Referring to the US military forces, Irene Khan, the general secretary of Amnesty International last month, noted, "There seems to have been more preparation to protect the oil wells than to protect hospitals, water systems or civilians."

In fact US efforts to resume the flow of oil from Iraq's southern oilfields were completed ahead of schedule and the massive

northern oilfields near Kirkuk are expected to be up and running in a matter of weeks. The task was assigned to the US Army Corps of Engineers, which set up a special Task Force to Restore Iraqi Oil (RIO). On Saturday, the US appointed Philip J. Carroll, a former chief executive of the Shell Oil company, the US unit of Royal Dutch/Shell, to head the nation's oil industry, along with two Iraqi figureheads needed to sign over contracts to US and British energy conglomerates.

Meanwhile, the social disaster facing millions of ordinary Iraqis is worsening.

The *New York Times* noted Sunday that "confusion and frustration reign in most sections of Baghdad, a city of about 4.5 million. Many businesses have yet to reopen and people are complaining of skyrocketing food prices and the lack of paychecks to buy staples.

"Hundreds of angry Iraqis demonstrated today at the Palestine Hotel, where most foreign journalists here are staying, demanding order and jobs. Many protesters complained that they had filled out job applications only to learn that few if any jobs were available."

The article also noted that none of the city's teachers have been paid since February and they feared that their salaries—the equivalent of \$3 to \$10 a month—would not be enough to live on. The head of the US occupation administration, former General Jay Garner, has promised to pay civil servants an emergency allocation of \$20 each, but nothing has materialized.

Sixty percent of the population depended on the government for sustenance, as sanctions crippled the country's agricultural sector and forced the government to import food staples. Aid agencies have warned that millions could start going hungry in central and southern Iraq if the US does not protect humanitarian deliveries from looting and violence.

Before the war, the Hussein government distributed several months of rations to every Iraqi family but experts expect that food to run out soon. Food is available in private markets in Baghdad and other cities, but the poor could not afford to buy it before the war and now prices have shot up.

The food crisis has been exacerbated by the damage done to Iraq's irrigation system, which has lost electrical power. Experts expect the country to produce only one-third of the crops it did in 2002.

Many of Baghdad's 33 hospitals remain closed due to power cuts, medicine shortages, lack of staff and fear of continued looting. Those that remain open are unable to cope with the war wounded and the increased number of patients whose chronic diseases worsened due to stress of war, the lack of medication and forced changes in diets. Scores of Iraqi children have been brought in after being injured from unexploded ordinance and cluster bombs.

Doctors in Baghdad suspect hundreds of children have cholera and typhoid, two potentially fatal diseases caused by filthy water, energy blackouts that have rotted food, tons of garbage that have piled up in the streets and open sewage. More than half of the children brought for treatment at Al-Iskan children's hospital were suffering from dehydration and diarrhea, according to Dr. Ahmed Abdul Fattah, the assistant director.

The diseases could be controlled with antibiotics, but hospitals

have no fully working labs and face critical shortages of medical supplies, due to sanctions and looting. If untreated, cholera kills 50 to 80 percent of its victims. It is most lethal for children under five and for the elderly.

"Unfortunately, we can expect many more young children to die rapidly," said George Hatim, UNICEF's chief officer in Baghdad. "Humanitarian groups can do a great deal but they cannot be a substitute for a whole system. We're talking about a whole population, we're not talking about a refugee camp or an internally displaced population. Iraq is now in a sense a stateless state and it is the children who are now suffering and paying the price."

The Royal Society, the UK's national science academy, has demanded that American and British military forces remove the toxic residues left by up to 2,000 tons of depleted uranium (DU) weapons used during the war. Many scientists believe that DU—used in armor-piercing rounds and "bunker-buster" rockets and bombs—causes cancer and other severe illnesses after its radioactive residue goes into the air or seeps into water supplies.

The *Guardian* newspaper reported that the society was outraged because the Pentagon had claimed it had the backing of the British scientists in saying DU was not dangerous. In fact, a spokesman for the society said, soldiers and civilians were in danger. Children playing in contaminated areas were particularly at risk.

Professor Brian Spratt, who chairs a Royal Society working group on DU health hazards, said the US and Britain should immediately monitor residential areas, water and milk supplies for any increase in uranium levels. DU has been suspected of causing a rise in cancer among Iraqi civilians, particularly children, following the first Gulf War in 1991, when its use was initiated by the US. Since then, Iraqi health authorities reported that the number of cancer cases in the country had quadrupled, with the greatest concentration in the south, where the largest amount of DU bombs and shells were used.

Another opponent of the use of DU weapons is Professor Doug Rokke, a one-time US army colonel who is also a former director of the Pentagon's DU project, and a former professor of environmental science in Alabama. He told the *Guardian* a nation's military personnel cannot willfully contaminate another nation, cause harm to persons and the environment and then ignore the consequences of their actions.

US officials have said they have no plans for any DU clean-up in Iraq nor will they even test all US soldiers for exposure.



To contact the WSW and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact