

As US viceroy denies crisis

WHO warns of cholera epidemic in Iraq

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One day after the chief of the US occupation of Iraq visited the southern city of Basra and repeated his denial that there is any humanitarian crisis in the country, the World Health Organization warned that the region is confronting a cholera epidemic.

“An outbreak of cholera, affecting probably several hundreds of people, is occurring,” warned Fadela Chaib of the UN agency, which dispatched a team to Basra this week. The WHO said that two hospitals in the city had already confirmed 17 cases of cholera and that scores of patients are being admitted daily with diarrheal disease, most of them children under the age of four.

Doctors at the hospitals complained that it is impossible to conduct adequate tests on the patients because their laboratories have been destroyed and vital supplies have been looted. As a result, the WHO is taking samples to Kuwait for analysis.

At Basra Children’s Hospital, 90 percent of the outpatients seen daily are suffering from diarrhea. The hospital has identified four cholera cases, while others among its young patients have been diagnosed with hepatitis and typhoid, like cholera waterborne diseases.

The scope of the health crisis is believed to be far greater than the numbers turning up at the Basra hospitals. Conditions of poverty and lack of security are so desperate that many people never make it into a hospital. Doctors themselves complain that they take their lives in their hands by going to work, while ambulances and vehicles used to transport medical staff have been stolen.

Doctors who are battling the disease warn that they are only treating the symptoms. The underlying cause is the social breakdown caused by the illegal US invasion of Iraq, which has destroyed the country’s water, sewerage and electrical systems, ended sanitation and

trash collection services and left what had been a functioning public health system in a shambles. The onset of the hot summer months creates the ideal conditions for the spread of infections.

An outbreak of cholera cases has also been reported in the Iraqi capital of Baghdad. As in Basra, the epidemic is centered in the city’s poorest neighborhoods.

The WHO warning came just a day after retired Lt. Gen. Jay Garner, the Pentagon’s “civil administrator” of Iraq, made his first trip to Basra, Iraq’s second-largest city, with a population of 1.3 million. The highlight of his brief stopover was a tour of the Shaiba Oil Refinery, the country’s second largest, and a key installation in the industry that is a main target of the Bush administration’s plans for privatization and transfer of Iraqi assets to US-based corporations.

Garner denied that there existed any humanitarian crisis in Iraq, dismissing growing protests by Iraqi citizens as a hangover from the politics of the Saddam Hussein regime. “You’ve got Iraqi people who have been in a dark room for 35 years,” he said. “We opened the door and let the light in. It takes a while to get your eyes calibrated to the light.”

The US viceroy said that his inspection of Basra convinced him that conditions were steadily improving. “From what we see, everything’s going the right way,” he said.

During a quick visit to the Basra General Hospital, however, the chief of the US occupation came face-to-face with the reality of the growing crisis before quickly making his exit. Doctors told him that they are forced to treat patients without antibiotics and perform surgery with no anesthesia. They added that they are overwhelmed by the number of cases involving gastroenteritis. Their ambulances have been stolen and

they are threatened by armed thugs on the streets and in their hospital.

Reporting on the visit, the *Washington Post*'s Carol Morello provided a description of the US official's exit from the hospital that serves as a fitting metaphor for the brutal and predatory character of the US war and occupation:

"As Garner left the director's office, an Iraqi man trailed him, carrying a small boy about 5 years old with both legs in casts. Blood seeped from the foot of one cast as the man tried to attract Garner's attention. Garner, surrounded by bodyguards and aides, shook hands with the director and, without appearing to notice the man, left to visit an oil refinery."

Under the Geneva Convention, an occupying power is obliged to ensure that basic social services are working, protect the civilian population and see to its basic needs. The US has denied that it is carrying out an occupation—referring to its military takeover as "liberation"—in part to shrug off these obligations under international law.

Meanwhile, hundreds of doctors, nurses and medical workers demonstrated in Baghdad Wednesday, protesting the deterioration of the public health system and opposing the US occupation authorities' imposition of a corrupt former official of the deposed Ba'athist regime as the head of the Health Ministry. The medical workers also demanded an end to fees for medical services, which they said was denying care to the poor, and an increase in their salaries.



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