

US soldiers' families, veterans go to Iraq to oppose war

Bill Vann**4 December 2003**

A delegation of family members of US soldiers and military veterans arrived in Baghdad Sunday on a two-week tour. Most have voiced opposition to the US occupation, while some said they wanted to see for themselves the real effects of the Bush administration's policies in the country and the conditions facing both US soldiers and the Iraqi people.

The group is led by Fernando Suarez de Solar, a Mexican citizen who lives in Escondido, California, near San Diego. His 20-year-old son Jesus Alberto was among the first Marines to die in the US invasion last March. The young man lost his life to an unexploded US cluster bomb.

In the wake of his son's death, Suarez, 48, has become a vocal opponent of US policy in Iraq, denouncing the intervention as an "illegal war" and demanding the immediate withdrawal of all US troops.

"A mission of peace, that is what we are trying to do," he told the Associated Press. "The idea is that the people of Iraq understand that we are not their enemies, that we are also suffering in this war."

Suarez brought with him to Baghdad some 2,000 letters written by US and Mexican children to Iraqi schoolchildren and American soldiers. One of the letters, from a 10-year-old girl in Watsonville, California, asked forgiveness from Iraqi children who have lost their parents in the war.

He and other delegation members have also brought clothing and other gifts for Iraqi children.

"Other people have warned us that it is not safe to travel to Iraq, but we wanted to show that ordinary Americans like peace," Suarez added. "The youth in Iraq only see the American flag on the uniforms. They see that as the destroyer of their life and family. It's very important to try to reach them."

The US occupation authorities have met the relatives with barely concealed hostility, stressing that they cannot

guarantee the group's security. The military has barred the delegation from entering US bases in Iraq, placing in question whether any of them will be able to see their children or husbands.

Moreover, one of the groups that organized the tour has charged the Pentagon with conducting an active campaign of intimidation to dissuade other relatives from making the trip.

Medea Benjamin, the director of the San Francisco-based human rights group Global Exchange, said that several people who had wanted to come to Iraq dropped out because of retribution faced by their relatives in uniform. One woman, she said, reported that her Army Reservist husband was reassigned to more arduous duty and denied access to telephone calls and email after his superiors learned she intended to join the delegation. Two other wives also dropped out after their husbands were reprimanded by their commanders.

Also participating in the 10-member delegation are parents of occupation troops, two wives of soldiers based at Fort Bragg, North Carolina, who are in Iraq and four veterans of the Vietnam and Persian Gulf wars, two of them with children also on active duty in Iraq.

The group is visiting schools and hospitals and is seeking audiences with US occupation officials and military commanders as well as members of the US-created Iraqi Governing Council.

Annabelle Valencia, of Tucson, Arizona, who has two children stationed in Iraq, said that she went to Iraq both to try to see them and to express solidarity with the Iraqi people.

"I want to talk with them [the Iraqis] and tell them that we here in the US are their brothers," she told the *Arizona Daily Star*. "We do not want any more blood to be spilled."

She told the paper that both of her children had faced attacks by the Iraqi resistance since arriving in the

country. Her son Chuveny, 22, a paratrooper with the Army's 82nd Airborne Division, narrowly escaped injury from an explosive device planted on a road near Baghdad. Her daughter Giselle, 24, with the Army's Fourth Infantry Division, came under hostile fire near Tikrit.

While she and her husband initially backed the invasion of Iraq, Annabelle has since turned against the US occupation, participating in antiwar demonstrations. "When the war came we supported the war," she told the *Daily Star*. "But then the war ended but my children are still there. We want this to end. They told us my children would be gone six months, but they lied to us."

Michael Lopercio, a restaurant owner from Tempe, Arizona, came because his son Anthony is an Army private stationed near the strife-torn city of Fallujah. He said that Iraqis that he has met were becoming "less and less hopeful by the day" under conditions in which there are no jobs and hospitals lack basic medicines.

Lopercio voiced disquiet both about the continuing US occupation and over the lack of any serious public debate in the US over the Bush administration's policy in Iraq.

"One of the things that confuses me is that, when I grew up, the Vietnam War was in full swing and everyone was eyeing it with a lot of skepticism," Lopercio told the *Los Angeles Times*. "With this war, if anything, there is disinterest. We're focused on Jacko, Kobe Bryant. If this trip helps refocus our attention where it ought to be, even just a little bit, the trip will be a success. Because what we're doing in Iraq could have dire consequences for generations."

Fernando Suarez del Solar told the *Los Angeles Times* that a personal motive for making the journey was to visit the spot where his son was killed and bring home a jar of the soil into which he bled.

"I'm going to take the dirt to a park in Escondido where Jesus used to go when we lived there," the father said. "I'm going to plant a white rose in it. I believe it's important to have a piece of where he died, since he died so far away."



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