

Nine months after US invasion

Fuel shortages, blackouts heighten Iraqi opposition to American occupation

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More than nine months after the US invasion, the Iraqi people enter the new year facing rolling electricity blackouts, fuel rationing, a devastated communications system and a general crisis in the country's infrastructure.

Most glaring is the rationing of gasoline in a country with the world's second-largest oil reserves. In mid-December, Iraq's oil ministry announced new restrictions on gasoline distribution, allowing motorists only 30 liters of gas per fill-up. Huge lines of motorists waiting to fill their tanks, some as long as two miles, are to be found in cities across the country.

Anger over the fuel shortage is increasingly directed against the occupation forces. "Only if the Americans go out of Iraq will all the problems be solved," Shihab Turki, 24, the owner of a car wash business located next to a gas station, told the *Miami Herald* (December 7).

Gas, commonly referred to as benzene, sold at the pump costs about 20 dinars a liter, or about US\$1, to fill a tank. But prices for gas sold on the black market from roadside stalls have jumped 400 percent since October. These salesmen charge 400-500 dinars (\$20-\$25) a tank, an option only for the well-off, and a fortune for taxi drivers, who earn only about \$10 a day.

Most drivers have no option but to wait in line or go without. Taxi driver Abdul Rahman Kittab told the *Herald* he waits all day to fill up: "I work one day, the next day I spend in the gas line so I can work the third day."

Adding to the fuel shortage is the huge influx of vehicles that have crossed the border from neighboring countries since the ouster of Saddam Hussein. An estimated 250,000 to 400,000 cars have entered Iraq, largely due to a reduction in duties charged—down to as little as \$200 per car from as much as 100 percent of the purchase price on some luxury vehicles before the war.

Before the war, the Bush administration had claimed that oil exports would finance a large part of the country's reconstruction, but Iraq's current level of exports stands at only about 2.8 million barrels a day, lower than pre-war levels. While oil is flowing from some southern oilfields near Basra, sabotage on oilfields in the north has slowed production, and it is unlikely the US goal of doubling output by next April will be met. Oil refineries are operating as much as 55 percent below capacity.

US authorities have publicly expressed general indifference toward the fuel shortages. The top military commander, Lt. Gen. Ricardo Sanchez, described them as "an availability and distribution challenge."

However, a December 15 US Defense Department report entitled "Draft Working Papers: Iraq Status" reveals that the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) is running critically short of its own goals for fuel production, meeting only 54 percent of its goal for diesel fuel, 45 percent for liquefied petroleum gas, 45 percent for kerosene, and 64 percent for gasoline/benzene.

According to the report, national electricity production stands at less than 3,500 megawatts, far short of the CPA's goal of 5,000 megawatts, and only about a quarter of what is needed, according to electricity ministry officials. Baghdad continues to endure rotating power blackouts.

According to the *Boston Globe*, this energy crisis is "disrupting the lives not only of the poor, but of the middle class, and raising anti-American rage among the people hitherto most inclined to support the US military's seizure of Iraq."

During the summer, riots broke out in Basra neighborhoods where residents were unable to use air conditioning to counter the heat. Lack of electrical power

also affects the water supply, intermittently shutting down pumps and water treatment facilities.

US forces bombed the telephone infrastructure during the war, and the majority of the country has no telephone service. Nine months after the US invasion, there is still no way to make a simple telephone call, disrupting both the lives of families as well as businesses. The *Los Angeles Times* notes that the lack of phone service “is slowing the recovery of every public and private enterprise and further alienating Iraqis, who are already skeptical of Washington’s vision for democracy in their nation.”

The *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* reports the case of Zeyed Hassan Saleh Al-Ithawi, a young real estate broker, who “spends his days running through the streets relaying messages.” “This is no way to do business,” said Al-Ithawi. “I have to close up completely and get into a cab just to go contact clients, ask about prices or just to say something to somebody.”

The restoration of the telephone system has been further delayed by a Pentagon investigation into the awarding of phone licenses to Iraqi Governing Council member and US stooge Ahmed Chalabi.

According to the Defense Department’s own figures, only “1,812 schools out of 11,939 schools damaged in some way” by the US attack have been rehabilitated. Bechtel International Systems holds the lucrative USAID (US Agency for International Development) contract to repair more than 1,200 Iraqi schools.

The *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* reports that “One frustrated American, Maj. Linda Scharf, a civil affairs officer, ordered a survey of 20 Bechtel-repaired schools in her area. She found dangerous debris left in playgrounds, sloppy paint jobs and broken toilets. ‘The work was horrible,’ she said.”

Bechtel won the largest Iraq reconstruction contract, worth about \$1 billion, to repair everything from schools to hospitals to ports. The corporation has received about \$48 million for school repair, or about \$38,000 per school.

Bechtel’s work has been remarkably shoddy. Baghdad primary school principal Fawzyia al Ali expressed her disappointment in an interview with the *Boston Globe* (December 21, 2003): “‘When they came, they promised me a lot and had an agreement with a big company for construction,’ Ali said recently while standing by the sewage, which welled up after workers dug in the wrong place to find a septic tank. ‘I had a lot of hope. They promised a lot, and the result was the opposite.’”

Globe. According to these problems there

Isra Mohammed, a regional planning director in Baghdad, has received numerous complaints about Bechtel’s school rehabilitation projects. Problems include students being locked in classrooms due to broken door handles, broken water faucets, and overflowing toilets. Teachers and principals reported, “Desks and chalkboards, already in short supply, were in the trash heap after painters had used them as makeshift stepladders. Laborers had carted off working ceiling fans and sturdy doors, and installed cheap replacements.”

Hundreds of thousands of housing units were destroyed by US bombing, and Iraq’s interim ministry of construction and housing is assigned the task of building one million homes by 2010. Saad Al-Zubaidi, an architect and advisor to the interim housing ministry, told *Middle East Online* (December 18) that the ministry needs \$5.6 billion for 2004 alone, but had received only \$500 million as of December 2003.

The massive presence of the US military has strained everyday life in many ways for the Iraqi population, in addition to neighborhood raids and other violence perpetrated by US and coalition forces. Throughout Baghdad, US troops have taken over recreational areas to set up military encampments. Baghdad Island, north of the capital city, with its flower gardens, sports facilities, restaurants and other attractions, used to be a popular destination for residents seeking relief from the stress of city life. The island is now the home of the US Army’s 1st Battalion, 37th Armored Regiment.

The US military has taken over other popular weekend attractions in Baghdad, including the Martyr’s Monument gardens, the Games City theme park, the Wedding Island marriage venue and the lakes of Habbaniya and Saddamiyat al-Tharthar. The local zoo is the only major park in the city that remains open to the public.



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