Iraqi social crisis continues unabated as US slashes funding

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The US State Department quarterly report on spending on Iraqi "relief and reconstruction", sent to Congress on October 5, provides a revealing insight into the nature of US operations in Iraq. Almost nothing has been spent on improving healthcare and sanitation or the water and electricity network, and previous funding commitments in these areas have been slashed.

Of the $US18.4 billion Iraqi reconstruction program allocated by Congress last year, only $1.22 billion has been spent. And of this, $623 million—more than half—has directly flowed into security and policing. By contrast, a meagre $2 million has gone to healthcare, $19 million to water projects and sanitation and $300 million to rebuilding of the electrical system.

Even these figures provide an inflated picture of what is actually spent on Iraq. The Center for Strategic and International Studies, a Washington based think-tank, recently estimated that approximately 70 percent of US funding ended up going to security contractors, insurance costs and corruption and mismanagement.

What is promoted as generous "reconstruction funding" for the Iraqi people is in fact little more than a slush fund for US corporations and security contractors, as well as a means of boosting the security apparatus of the US-installed interim government.

The State Department report gave details of last month's reallocation of $3.46 billion. Reflecting the increasing desperation of the Bush administration as it confronts mass resistance to the US-led occupation, John Negroponte, Washington's ambassador in Iraq, requested a huge increase in security funding. An additional budget allocation of $1.8 billion has been set aside for training and arming a further 45,000 police officers, 16,000 border officers and 20 Iraqi National Guard battalions to bolster the puppet regime of interim prime minister Iyad Allawi.

New funding was devoted to the promotion of "economic development". While couched in terms of helping the Iraqi people and increasing employment, these measures are aimed at further opening up the Iraqi economy to US investors, and carving up what remains of the public sector. The extra money, the State Department explained, is to "promote and strengthen the private sector, including restructuring and privatisation of State Owned Enterprises, trade policy reforms leading to World Trade Organisation accession, market access and trade and investment promotion, capital market development, micro-lending, and small and medium enterprise development".

All of the additional spending in these areas has been offset by equivalent cuts in water, sewerage and electricity reconstruction projects. The budget for repair work on the badly-damaged electricity network has been reduced by $1.1 billion, or 20 percent. Funding for similarly degraded water and sanitation works has been cut by $1.9 billion, or 45 percent of the original allotment.

These measures provide further evidence of the criminal character of the US-led occupation of Iraq. The Bush administration has never been concerned with the welfare of ordinary Iraqis. Far from "liberating" the Iraqi people, the US has replaced the Hussein dictatorship with its own more compliant police state. As the resistance to the occupation has gathered strength and support, the US has responded by gutting the limited social and infrastructure projects.

The cynicism of this operation was underscored by the comments of William Taylor, director of the Iraq Reconstruction Management Office at the US embassy in Baghdad. When asked by the *New York Times* why water and electricity money was being used to fund increased security, Taylor cited the thief Willie Sutton, who once explained that he robbed banks because that was where the money was. "If you're looking for $3.46 billion, you can't get it out of healthcare," Taylor said. "Where the money is, is electricity and water."

Ordinary Iraqis have experienced a social regression of staggering dimensions. The country's infrastructure was already badly damaged in the first Gulf War, when US-led forces deliberately targeted key installations. The UN sanctions regime undermined reconstruction work, and the 2003 invasion further exacerbated the crisis. For millions of people, life has become a matter of day-to-day survival, with a shattered economy, non-existent healthcare system, constant power blackouts, and a chronic shortage of clean drinking water.

Iraq's electricity supply has still not reached the modest target of 6,000 kilowatts set by former Coalition Provisional Authority head Paul Bremer for June 1. Households continue to experience regular blackouts. These affect every aspect of life for ordinary people, particularly in the summer, where temperatures in Baghdad and other areas can reach 50°C. Only the small minority who can afford their own generators are assured of a consistent power supply.

For everyone else, the lack of reliable air-conditioning poses serious health risks, particularly for children and the elderly. Further problems arise with the impossibility of keeping food refrigerated. The blackouts also affect schools and universities. "We are going to have our exams next week," an engineering student told the UN's Integrated Regional Information Networks (IRIN). "And you cannot imagine how hard it is doing it in a room without electricity—you cannot concentrate at all."

The electricity crisis has contributed to the breakdown of the sanitation infrastructure. USAID has admitted that more than half of Iraq's sewerage treatment facilities are still not working. In Baghdad, only one of the city's three plants has been fully repaired. Raw sewerage now flows through many streets, particularly those in the

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poorer districts. Baghdad's Sadr City, which has seen intense fighting between US forces and resistance fighters, has been particularly affected. "You cannot imagine what it is like living in a place where the smell of raw waste is constantly outside your home," one resident told IRIN. "It is terrible and the hot temperatures make it worse. Sometimes I have to go to my parent's home to get away from it."

There is a similar crisis in the supply of clean water. The *New York Times* reported last month that of the 100 water projects originally planned, only four are scheduled to start in the coming months. Kamil Chadirji, deputy minister for administration and financial affairs in the Iraqi Ministry of Municipalities and Public Works, angrily denounced the US funding cutbacks. "Nobody believes this will benefit Iraq," he said. "For a year we have been talking, with beautiful PowerPoint documents, but without a drop of water."

In many parts of Iraq, an estimated 60 percent of people have no choice but to drink water that is contaminated with chemicals and sewerage. "People are now basically drinking raw sewerage anywhere downstream from Baghdad, which is much of the population," noted William Fellows, a senior program officer with UNICEF. This has had disastrous public health implications, including epidemics of cholera, hepatitis, tuberculosis, measles, diarrhea, and debilitating eye and skin diseases.

"The whole problem is infrastructure," declared Dr Nima Abid, director general of public and primary health. "Definitely no major intervention has been done in this last one and a half years to repair the problem." The official told the *New York Times* how residents in Sadr City are forced to tap into water mains with improvised hoses. "Small electric pumps are then used to suck water into homes," the *Times* reported. "But in these same communities, sewerage either seeps from damaged pipes into the ground or runs freely in the streets, then through cracks and holes into people's houses. Sewerage is sucked in too, becoming mixed with the drinking water and spreading the [hepatitis] virus."

Those who contract diseases as a result of these living conditions rarely receive adequate treatment. There is a chronic shortage of medicines in Iraq, including basic anesthetics and antibiotics. Doctors work under tremendous pressure, and are paid just $150 a month. Those treatments that are available are often too expensive for ordinary people to afford. "They told me to go and buy this medicine from outside the hospital," a woman whose father was hospitalised in Baghdad told IRIN. "They asked for five injections and I don't have the money to buy one. I don't know what to do and my father is in a critical condition. Is this the new Iraq they promised us?"

The death rate has dramatically increased, with life expectancy for both men and women falling below 60. Children have been particularly affected by the war—27 percent of children under 5 are now chronically malnourished. A recent UNICEF report found that Iraq has suffered a bigger increase in infant mortality rates since 1990 than any other country. While some improvement was made between 1999 and 2002, the occupation has caused a dramatic regression. There have also been reports of high rates of post-traumatic stress disorder and other psychological problems among Iraqi children.

Young people have been badly affected by the breakdown of the education system. Almost 12,000 schools were destroyed or damaged in the war. Among those that have been repaired, many still lack water and electricity supplies. There is a serious shortage of textbooks—in Baghdad, there is one textbook for every 10 students. The guerrilla war between the US forces and resistance fighters has resulted in a plummeting school attendance rate, as parents fear for the safety of their children. When the new school term began on October 2, less than 700 pupils attended one primary school in Baghdad that has an enrollment of 1,500. Girls' education has particularly suffered, and the UN has noted a sharp decline in female literacy.

Every aspect of the social catastrophe is compounded by the disintegration of the economy. While a small layer of Iraqis, mainly criminals and collaborators, have benefited from the occupation, for the vast majority of the population, the war has only plunged them further into poverty. It has been estimated that in 2003, 27 percent of the population survived on less than $2 a day. While more recent statistics are unavailable, there is no reason to believe that any improvement has been made this year.

A UN World Food Program (WFP) survey released September 29 found that one-quarter of all Iraqis, or 6.5 million people, are highly dependent on food rations. An additional 3.6 million would become "food insecure" if the rationing system were discontinued. Many people are forced to trade their food rations for other necessities, such as medicine and clothing. "Despite receiving food rations from Iraq's Public Distribution System, these people are still struggling to cope," said Torben Due, WFP's Iraq director. "Although food is generally available, the poorest households cannot afford to buy from the markets."

Unemployment is estimated to be anywhere from 30 to 70 percent. Even for those who find work, much of it is casual and poorly paid. The breakdown of Iraq's public sector, which the US authorities have welcomed and encouraged, has seen many desperately needed professional and highly-skilled workers emigrate. For the Bush administration, providing decent jobs and adequate public services in Iraq is far less a concern than is the development of a "free market".

The situation in Iraq is indicative of the Bush administration's contempt for ordinary people. The essential problem is not insufficient planning or incompetent administration. Rather, the oppression of the Iraqi people is the inevitable consequence of a war that was driven by the Washington's ambition to control the country's oil resources. With the terrible living conditions helping to fuel anti-occupation sentiment, the US is responding with more and bloodier repression.

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