

Iraq: child malnutrition almost doubles after US invasion

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A study conducted by the Fafo Institute for Applied Social Science, a Norwegian research group, found that acute malnutrition among Iraqi children between the ages of six months and five years has increased from 4 percent to 7.7 percent since the US-led invasion in March last year.

“It’s in the level of some African countries,” Jon Pederson, the institute’s deputy managing director, told Associated Press. “Of course, no child should be malnourished, but when we’re getting to levels of 7 to 8 percent, it’s a clear sign of concern.”

The findings were based on a survey conducted in April and May of 22,000 Iraqi homes. The study, which is yet to be officially released, was assisted by Iraq’s central office for statistics and information technology, as well as the United Nations Development Program.

Carol Bellamy, head of UNICEF, the UN’s children’s agency, condemned the war for its impact on Iraqi children. “War is waged by adults, but it is the children who suffer the most. This protracted fighting and instability is wreaking havoc on Iraqi children.”

Approximately 400,000 Iraqi children now suffer from malnutrition. Affected children usually have stunted physical growth, as well as irreparably retarded mental development. The condition also leaves children vulnerable to other diseases and infections, including pneumonia and gastroenteritis.

The condition of Iraqi children stands as another indictment of the US occupation. The war, compounding the devastating effects of the first Gulf War and the subsequent sanctions regime, has devastated what was once a comparatively advanced society and economy. As the *Washington Post* noted last Sunday, the most pressing nutrition problem facing Iraqi youth a generation ago was obesity.

Malnutrition only became a serious problem in the

aftermath of the Gulf War. With the US leading a United Nations-backed embargo of many foods and medicines, acute malnutrition in Iraqi children peaked at 11 percent in 1996. Only with the introduction of the “oil for food” program did this rate begin to decline. By 2002 it was down to 4 percent.

Child malnourishment has again escalated under the occupation. The problem is bound up with the general social and economic crisis that has wracked Iraq since the invasion. Some 6.5 million Iraqis remain dependent on food rations. The poorest Iraqis frequently trade these rations for desperately needed medicine and clothing.

The Iraqi economy has been shattered, with unemployment estimated to be as high as 60 or 70 percent. The widespread poverty makes it very difficult for millions of families to afford adequate food for young children, or to purchase nutritional supplements necessary for the treatment of the malnourished.

The *Washington Post* reported on the situation in Baghdad’s main children’s hospital:

“‘Things have been worse for me since the war,’ said Kasim Said, a day laborer [visiting] his ailing year-old son, Abdullah. The child, lying on a pillow with a Winnie the Pooh washcloth to keep the flies off his head, weighs just 11 pounds.

“‘During the previous regime, I used to work on the government projects. Now there are no projects,’ his father said.

“‘When he finds work, he added, he can bring home \$10 to \$14 a day. If his wife is fortunate enough to find a can of Isomil, the nutritional supplement that doctors recommend, she pays \$7 for it.

“‘But the lady in the next bed said she just paid \$10,” said Suad Ahmed, who sat cross-legged on a bed in the same ward, trying to console her skeletal four-month-

old granddaughter, Hiba, who suffers from chronic diarrhea.”

An absence of consistent electricity and clean water supply in many parts of Iraq has also contributed to the massive increase in child malnutrition. The ongoing power shortages make it difficult for many people to boil unsafe drinking water. “Even myself, I suffer from the quality of water,” Zina Yahya, a nurse in a Baghdad maternity hospital, declared. “If you put it in a glass, you can see it’s turbid. I’ve heard of typhoid cases.”

The Iraqi health system has virtually collapsed. “From August to October 2004, Iraq’s health care system regressed considerably, moving further away from the tipping point,” concluded a recent study conducted by the Center for Strategic and International Studies. “In fact, of all the sectors reviewed for this report, health care had the most negative movement. Iraq’s health care system is currently incapable of providing adequate basic health care to the majority of the population.”

The health crisis in Iraq underscores the cynicism of the Bush administration’s claim to have liberated Iraq. Of the \$18.4 billion allocated by Congress last year for Iraqi reconstruction, only \$2 million has been spent on the health system. Last month the State Department cut the projected budget for repairing the electricity network by \$1.1 billion, and water and sanitation infrastructure by \$1.9 billion in order to boost the resources of the Iraqi police and military.



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