

UN report finds

US war in Iraq yields a social “tragedy”

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18 May 2005

A new study issued by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) reveals what the Iraqi Minister of Planning Barham Salih describes as “a rather tragic situation of the quality of life in Iraq.” What this minister in the Baghdad puppet regime did not care to say, unsurprisingly, is that this disaster for the Iraqi people is attributable overwhelmingly to the unrelenting assault by US imperialism over the past 15 years and more.

The Iran-Iraq war of the 1980s, a conflagration over which Washington warmed its hands; the Gulf War of 1991; more than a decade of sanctions; and the US invasion and ongoing occupation of Iraq have resulted in the death of untold numbers in that country, laid waste its infrastructure, health and education system and generally brought about a regression in the lives of millions. Oil-rich Iraq now suffers from some of the region’s highest rates of unemployment and child malnutrition and debilitating problems with electric power, sewage systems and other public services.

Among the indices of social misery contained in the report are the following:

- * Nearly a quarter of Iraq’s children suffer from chronic malnutrition.
- * The probability of dying before 40 for Iraqi children born between 2000 and 2004 is approximately three times the level in neighboring countries.
- * Three out of four Iraqi families report an unstable supply of electricity.
- * 40 percent of families in urban areas live in neighborhoods where sewage can be seen in the streets.
- * More than 722,000 Iraqi families have no access to either safe or stable drinking water.
- * The jobless rate for young men with secondary or higher education stands at 37 percent.

The study, entitled *Iraq Living Conditions Survey 2004* (ILCS), was organized by the UN development agency in collaboration with the Iraqi Ministry of Planning and Development Cooperation and conducted by a Norwegian-trained team from the Central Organisation for Statistics and Information Technology in Baghdad. It drew its conclusions from interviews carried out in April-August 2004 with members of 21,688 households in Iraq’s 18 provinces.

In their analysis of Iraq’s infrastructure, housing, environment, health system, conditions for women, labor market and other aspects of life, the authors of the UNDP report repeatedly resort to certain terms and phrases to describe their findings: “alarming” appears numerous times, along with “worsening,” “deterioration,” “falling behind” and “reverse development.”

In these words, as well as some of the starker figures, one can detect, within the dry (and timid) language of bourgeois social researchers, the scope of the human suffering in present-day Iraq.

The general contention of the study, pieced together from separate comments, is that Iraqi society made considerable advances in the 1970s, as “oil revenues began growing dramatically.... This period of rapid economic growth also saw significant rural-urban migration...and the

growth of employment in the public sector and in state-owned enterprises, both of which indicate that households’ incomes were increasing.”

However, Iraqi Gross Domestic Product has been declining since 1980, according to the report, “due to a combination of wars, sanctions, and economic mismanagement.... [H]ouseholds may have experienced a continuing decline in income over the past 25 years, a situation that is almost unheard of among middle-income countries.” This decline is particularly remarkable in the light of Iraq’s possession of the world’s second-largest proven oil reserves (and undiscovered reserves that some analysts suggest might place it closer to Saudi Arabia as an oil producer).

This “unheard of” situation can only be explained as the product of geopolitics, in particular the determination of the US, through one means or another (including diplomatic maneuvering, a brutal war that stopped short of occupation, economic strangulation and full-scale invasion), to control the Middle Eastern nation’s natural resources. Now occupying the country, Washington is least of all concerned with the conditions of the conquered people.

What have been the results of America’s war against the Iraqi people?

In regard to Iraq’s infrastructure, the ILCS argues that the US-led sanctions, “misguided economic policies” and three wars have contributed to its deterioration. Moreover, after “the most recent war, the situation worsened due to looting, destruction of public property, and general insecurity.”

The instability of the electrical supply remains a central problem for Iraqis. In urban areas in particular, many households have experienced a reduced supply and “a dramatic worsening of its quality and stability.” In Baghdad, 92 percent of all households suffer from an unstable electrical supply.

On average, the ILCS found, 33 percent of all Iraqi households have an unstable supply of drinking water (more than weekly problems with supply) and 17 percent of all households have neither safe nor stable drinking water. A full 70 percent of all rural households find it problematic to obtain the drinking water they need; in the southern regions, the figure reaches 76 percent. Poorer households, with young household heads, low education and small children, are faring the worst, revealing that “traditionally vulnerable groups are falling behind on this indicator.”

The report notes that, compared “to other countries in the region and to the earlier data from Iraq...we find that the supply of safe and stable water supply in Iraq has deteriorated.... A reduction in urban access to safe drinking water from 95 to 60 percent is grave. Compared to other Arab countries, Iraq is far behind, and the observed deterioration of the situation is alarming.” According to Salih, the planning minister, “In 1980, 75 percent of families had access to clean water.”

Sanitary conditions too “show a steep deterioration”; Iraqi sewage systems “show a reverse development.” The study notes reports of old and destroyed sewage systems, which lead to seeping of sewage into the ground and result in the contamination of drinking water systems.

Infant and child mortality rates show the same general trend. The ILCS data indicates “a progressive worsening of the situation for children.” This has occurred “in a context of declining infant and child mortality rates in neighbouring countries.” The study estimates the rate of maternal mortality, the number of deaths of women per 100,000 childbirths, to be 193, a figure only exceeded in the region by Syria and Yemen. Again, “Iraq has not participated in the overall decline in maternal mortality achieved in the past decades in other Middle Eastern countries.”

As the ILCS notes, “Most Iraqi children have lived their whole lives under sanctions and war.” The consequences for these most vulnerable members of society have been inevitable and tragic. Malnutrition among small children in Iraq is widespread. Almost one quarter of children between six months and five years suffer from chronic malnutrition; the prevalence of acute severe malnutrition is 10 percent. Compared with previous studies, the report notes, the level of malnutrition has increased and stabilized “at a high level during the last four years.” The authors find this “surprising” given that fully 96 percent of the population receive regular food rations.

In 1990, Iraq ranked 50th on the UN Development Program’s Human Development Index; in 2003, it ranked 126th. An Iraqi citizen’s average dietary intake was 3,300 calories; thanks to UN-US sanctions, a decade later the intake had shrunk by more than 1,000 calories per person, or by nearly a third.

A major childhood killer is diarrhea. A preventable condition, most commonly by good hygiene and clean drinking water, diarrhea accounted for 2 deaths in 10 among under-five-year-old Iraqis before the 1991 US-led war; this percentage rose to 4 in 10 after the war. The fatality rate of diarrhea per 1,000 cases was reported to have climbed from 1.6 in 1990 to 19.3 in 1998, a 12-fold increase. It is widely acknowledged that the sanctions against Iraq cost hundreds of thousands of children their lives.

Ordinarily there is a correlation between piped water, considered safe, and a lower incidence of childhood diarrhea. In Iraq recently that correlation has not been evident. The authors suggest that this may be due to the irregularity of electricity in Iraq. “This has led to interruptions in the function of sewage pumps and over-flooding of the sewage system.” In other words, “safe” piped water in Iraq is often unsafe.

Confronting the miserable state of the Iraqi health care system as a whole, the ILCS authors advance an argument that is worth citing at length:

“In the 1980s, Iraq was widely considered to have one of the region’s best health care systems, with advanced, technological specialist care, and an extensive net of primary health care. However, after years of war and sanctions, this situation has changed completely. Among the current major problems are lack of health personnel, lack of medicines, non-functioning medical equipment and destroyed hospitals and health centres. The health services are also heavily affected by infrastructure problems, including degraded or disrupted electricity supply, sanitation, and communications. The situation has been characterized in this way: ‘Iraq is a second world country, accustomed to a first world health system, which now has the epidemiological profile of a third world country (Garfield, Zaidi & Lennox 1997).’ ”

Before the first US-led war in 1991, Iraq had a network of approximately 1,800 primary health centers; by 2001, that figure had declined to 929, of which a third were considered in need of rehabilitation. “In the course of the war launched in mid-March 2003, further destruction of infrastructure and health facilities were reported.” In 1999-2003, Iraq had one third the number of physicians per 100,000 inhabitants as its neighbors Jordan, Syria and Lebanon.

Decades of war have taken their toll. The ILCS research indicates that more than 200,000 Iraqis currently have chronic disabilities caused by war. The number of deaths attributable to the 2003 US war and occupation remains unknown, principally because neither Washington nor the puppet

authorities in Baghdad have the slightest interest in calculating the figure. A study in *The Lancet* medical journal last year estimated that as many as 100,000 Iraqis had died in the conflict. The *Iraqi Living Conditions 2004* report places the figure at somewhere between 18,000 and 29,000.

A revealing fact brought out in the report is that a higher percentage of children, women and elderly have been chronically disabled as a result of the ongoing war than in the previous conflicts in the 1980s and 1990s—not astonishing, given that the current fighting is taking place almost entirely in Iraqi cities and towns. “[I]n the ongoing war, it is the civilian population that are most affected. This impression is further strengthened by the fact that, in the most recent war, there is almost no difference in the number of women and men that were disabled.”

Writing on education and the position of women in Iraqi society, the ILCS authors offer comments similar to those they made in regard to health care: after considerable advances in the 1970s and 1980s, conditions have seriously worsened under the impact of sanctions and war.

“Iraq’s educational system,” they write, “used to be among the best in the region; one of the country’s most important assets remains its well-educated people. The results of education reforms in the 1970s and 1980s are evident in the high literacy rates in the adult population.” For example, in 1978 the Baathist government launched the National Comprehensive Campaign for the Eradication of Illiteracy, which aimed at eliminating illiteracy for all those between the ages of 15 and 45. There was “a special emphasis on the full participation and emancipation of women.”

The literacy rate today for those 15 to 24, however, is lower than for those 25 to 34, indicating that the younger generation is lagging behind its predecessors. This is a result of the deterioration of the educational system over the past 10 to 15 years. The literacy rate for women has stagnated, and, in certain regions, the level of female illiteracy is very high. Some 65 percent of the adult population in Iraq is literate, compared with 86 percent in Jordan and 75 percent in Syria.

School enrolment at all levels has dropped over the past decade. Iraq is “far behind” the UN Millennium Development Goal of ensuring that all boys and girls complete a full course of primary schooling and eliminating gender disparity in primary and secondary education. In rural areas, 38 percent of women between 15 and 24 have not completed elementary education.

On the overall position of women in Iraqi society, the ILCS argues that after improvement in the 1970s, there have been numerous setbacks in the past 15 years. In the late 1960s, the Baath party started an ideological campaign for women’s participation in the labor force and educational system. This “state feminism” was typical of bourgeois nationalist regimes in the aftermath of decolonization. A national illiteracy campaign for women was introduced in 1978; according to the Baathist regime, 1.5 million were reached and illiteracy was eliminated in some regions. “Yet data from the ILCS shows a high level of illiteracy among women today.” Women’s participation in the labor force and education, once again, is among the lowest in the region.

The study, in passing, makes the interesting observation that one effect of the US pressure on the Hussein regime was the latter’s decision after 1990 to seek stronger ties with religious leaders and neighboring, less secular regimes, thus reinforcing conservative and more patriarchal trends in Iraqi society.

Based on its survey results, the ILCS estimates the unemployment rate, including discouraged workers (those who have given up looking), at 18.4 percent. The jobless figure among young people—in a country where 39 percent of the population is less than 15 years old—is 33.4 percent and “reaches an astonishing 37.2 percent” among men with secondary or higher education.

The report contends that the majority of those employed before the US invasion have kept their jobs—with the important exception of those in the

army—and that the majority of the unemployed are new entrants to the labor market.

All the accumulated tragedies of the past two decades have created a situation in which the average Iraqi household probably has lower real income in 2004 than in 1980. The ILCS found the median per-capita household income in 2003 to be 366,000 dinars (about \$255). Some 16 percent of Iraqi households are unable to buy any one of six elementary items (new clothes, heating, etc.); 35 percent would be unable to raise 100,000 dinars in an emergency; 28 percent describe themselves as “among the poor in Iraq.” The poorest 20 percent of households receive less than 7 percent of the total income of Iraqi households; the richest 20 percent receive 44 percent—in fact, however, income inequality in Iraq is still relatively low compared to the rest of the region.

The ILCS figures reveal that wide layers of the population in what was a relatively modern society, rich in resources, have been reduced to poverty and degradation in large measure by American imperialist policy, conditions that have been worsened by the ongoing occupation. The economic and social facts refute the claims of the Bush administration and the US media about America’s “democratizing” and “nation-building” mission in Iraq. They represent an indictment of US policy pursued by both Republicans and Democrats.

Alleviating the immense suffering of the Iraqi people requires, first and foremost, the immediate withdrawal of all US forces, war crimes trials of those officials responsible for the 2003 invasion and tens of billions of dollars in reparations.



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