

Iraqi infant mortality soars by 150 percent—a damning revelation of US war crimes

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The infant mortality rate in Iraq has increased by a shocking 150 percent since 1990—the highest such increase recorded for any country in the world—according to an annual report issued by the child advocacy group, Save the Children.

According to the report, in 2005, the last year for which reliable data is available, one in eight Iraqi children—122,000 in all—died before reaching their fifth birthday. More than half of these deaths were recorded among new-born infants, with pneumonia and diarrhea claiming the greatest toll among Iraqi babies.

The infant mortality rate has long been considered one of the key measures of societal progress and wellbeing. The astounding figures recorded in Iraq are an accurate reflection of the social devastation wrought both by the US invasion of 2003 and more than a decade of US-backed economic sanctions that preceded it.

“Conservative estimates place increases in infant mortality following the 2003 invasion of Iraq at 37 percent,” according to the Save the Children report. The implications of such a change—in the space of just two years—are staggering. Given the steady escalation of the armed conflict in Iraq and the continued deterioration of social conditions for masses of people in the country, the rate of increase in infant and child deaths was no doubt even greater over the course of 2006.

The report blamed the horrific decline in infant and child health since the invasion on the steadily worsening living conditions for the Iraqi population as a whole, including “electricity shortages, insufficient clean water, deteriorating health services and soaring inflation.”

This overall destruction of basic social infrastructure unleashed by the US invasion and occupation has been

translated into a horrendous decline in child health. “Only 35 percent of Iraqi children are fully immunized, and more than one-fifth (21 percent) are severely or moderately stunted” as a result of malnutrition, the study found.

The statistics compiled by Save the Children indicate that in 1990 the mortality rate for children under five in Iraq stood at 50 for every 1,000 live births—among the best outcomes reported for the entire Arab world at the time. In 2005, the figure was 125 per 1,000 live births—roughly equivalent to the figures recorded in countries like Malawi, Mauritania, Uganda and Haiti.

While some countries—all with one exception in Africa—have higher death rates than Iraq, none came even near the rate of increase in infant mortality recorded by the US-occupied country (Botswana came closest, with a 107 percent rise, while still recording a slightly lower rate of 120 deaths per 1,000 live births).

The destruction of the conditions and very lives of Iraqi children began well before US troops invaded the country in 2003. The 1990-1991 Gulf War saw more than 90,000 tons of US bombs and missiles dropped on Iraq, smashing much of its essential infrastructure, including power plants and water and sanitation systems and creating the conditions for a public health disaster.

The war was followed by a decade of punishing sanctions that deprived Iraqi children and the population as a whole of essential medical supplies and adequate nutrition. Even chlorine, needed to purify water, was embargoed, depriving infants and small children of a clean water supply and condemning many to death.

It was during this period that the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) estimated that an additional half a million Iraqi children had died

between 1991 and 1998 as a result of the sanctions.

In 1998, the coordinator of United Nations humanitarian operations in Iraq, Denis Halliday, resigned in protest calling the sanctions a form of “genocide” and “a deliberate policy to destroy the people of Iraq.” Halliday said at the time, “We are in the process of destroying an entire society. It is as simple and terrifying as that. It is illegal and immoral.”

President Bill Clinton’s Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, confronted in a television interview with the UN estimate of 500,000 children having died as a result of the US-backed sanctions, famously answered, “We think the price is worth it.”

The rise in infant mortality rates represents the starkest manifestation of the murderous impact that US aggression upon Iraq and its children over a protracted period. But there are many other indications that for those who survive, conditions of life have become increasingly unbearable.

According to figures reported by the Iraqi government, some 900,000 children have been left orphans by the carnage that has swept Iraq since the US invasion of 2003. It is estimated that at the present levels of violence, some 400 children are left orphaned every day in the country.

The Iraqi Ministry of Education, meanwhile, estimates that barely 30 percent of the country’s 3.5 million elementary school children are attending classes, a sharp decline from 75 percent last year. A study sponsored by the World Health Organization in the Iraqi city of Mosul, found fully 30 percent of school children surveyed suffering from posttraumatic stress disorder.

Significantly, the other country that is presently occupied by the US military and remains the scene of a bitter counterinsurgency war—Afghanistan—ranks as the second worst in the world in terms of its infant mortality rate, with 257 deaths for every 1,000 live births. In other words, more than one out of four Afghan children dies before the age of five. On average, every Afghan mother sees two of her children die as infants, while one in six women die in childbirth.

According to the Save the Children study, 40 percent of Afghan children are malnourished and less than half have access to safe water. The report also notes that, while “1 child in 100,000 in the United States dies of pneumonia each year, roughly 1 in 15” dies of the

disease in Afghanistan.

On a world scale, Save the Children reports, “Every year, more than 10 million children die before they reach the age of 5, most from preventable causes and almost all in poor countries.” It adds that while infant global infant mortality rates had improved in previous decades, “rates of progress are slowing and in many countries, child death rates are getting worse.”

The organization insists that available and low-cost solutions could easily prevent 6 million of these deaths annually. These include, “skilled care at childbirth, breastfeeding, measles immunization, oral rehydration therapy for diarrhea and medical care for pneumonia.” But for many of the most impoverished countries, and for many others in the most oppressed layers of society elsewhere, these elementary forms of health care and education are not provided.

The statistics included in the report also indicate that the problems of infant mortality reflect the worldwide growth of social inequality, which is literally killing millions of children every year.

“A child in the poorest fifth of a population is more than twice as likely to die compared to a child from the richest fifth,” the study finds. “Eliminating health-care inequities—and bringing mortality rates among the poorest 80 percent of the population down to those prevailing among the richest 20 percent—would prevent about 4 million of the 10 million deaths each year.”

In addition to the growing impact of social inequality within each country, the gap between the wealthiest and most impoverished countries has also continued to widen. While in 1990, the child mortality rate for sub-Saharan Africa was 20 times higher than for the industrialized countries, by 2005, the rate was 28 times as high, the study said.



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