

Humanitarian disaster produced by US invasion

Oxfam reports one-third of Iraqis in need of emergency aid

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Eight million Iraqis—or one third of the country's population—urgently require water, sanitation, food and shelter, according to a new report issued by the British-based relief organization Oxfam and the NGO Coordination Committee of Iraq, a network of nearly 300 international and Iraq-based non-governmental organizations.

The report paints a devastating picture of the humanitarian disaster produced by the US invasion in March 2003, as well as the economic sanctions imposed on Iraq for more than decade after the first Gulf War. It underscores the criminal character of the war and of both political parties in Washington, which continue to support the occupation of the oil-rich country.

The report notes that in addition to the daily violence from occupying forces and sectarian warfare, “another kind of crisis, also due to the impact of the war, has been slowly unfolding.”

According to Oxfam, Iraq's civilians are “suffering from a denial of fundamental human rights in the form of chronic poverty, malnutrition, illness, lack of access to basic services, and destruction of homes, vital facilities, and infrastructure, as well as injury and death. Basic indicators of humanitarian need in Iraq show that the slide into poverty and deprivation since the coalition forces entered the country in 2003 has been dramatic, and a deep trauma for the Iraqi people.”

Researchers found that of the eight million people in need of aid, four million are “food insecure and in dire need of different types of humanitarian assistance.” Two million more are displaced refugees in their own country, nearly three-quarters of whom are women and children. In addition, another two million Iraqis have been forced to migrate to other countries, especially Syria and Jordan, producing the “fastest-growing refugee crisis in the world.”

The number people lacking sufficient food has increased by more than 50 percent since 2004, when the World Food Program determined that 2.6 million Iraqis were “extremely

poor.” Of the four million people who cannot regularly buy enough to eat, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees estimates that only 60 percent currently have access to rations supplied by the government-run public distribution system. In 2004 approximately 96 percent of needy Iraqis received such packages, which include wheat, rice, dried milk, sugar, tea and soap.

Displaced Iraqis face the most difficult conditions. Thirty-two percent of those forced to leave their homes say they have no access to public rations, 51 percent report receiving food rations only sometimes, while only 17 percent say they always received them. Criminal gangs and militias often bar supply trucks from reaching certain areas or loot them along the way. In addition, the violence that has caused so many Iraqis to flee prevents them from returning home to apply for the transfer of their rations to a new location.

As a result of these conditions, child malnutrition rates in Iraq have risen from 19 percent before the 2003 invasion to 28 percent four years later, according to the Catholic relief agency Caritas. More than 11 percent of newborn babies were underweight in 2006, compared with 4 percent in 2003.

According to the Iraqi government's own statistics, 43 percent of Iraqis suffer from “absolute poverty” and over 50 percent of the workforce is unemployed. Many families have lost their main breadwinner due to the violent deaths of tens of thousands of Iraqi men. If they get anything at all, widows receive a \$100 a month from the government, half the average monthly wage of \$200.

The report notes that the proportion of Iraqis without an adequate water supply has risen from 50 percent to 70 percent since 2003. In addition, 80 percent of Iraqis lack effective sanitation. According to the International Committee of the Red Cross, water is often contaminated due to poor repair of sewage and water supply networks and the discharge of raw sewage into rivers, which are the main source of drinking water. This has led to an increase in diarrheal diseases in the population.

There has also been a decline in electricity supplies over the past few months, with most homes in Baghdad and other cities receiving only two hours of electricity a day.

According to Oxfam, health services—which have been stretched beyond the limit due to the ongoing violence—are “generally in a catastrophic situation in the capital, in the main towns, and across the governates.” In addition, hundreds of thousands of refugees are often not able to receive treatment because they are outside of the home area where they are registered.

The breakdown of the country’s infrastructure and widespread corruption has undermined the ability of the state-owned medical supply company, KEMADIA, to distribute equipment to the country’s hospitals and health care centers. Of the 180 hospitals nationwide, 90 percent lack key resources, including basic medical and surgical supplies. Doctors have reportedly asked the relatives of injured patients to search local pharmacies for blood bags, sutures and infusions before they can start surgery.

Iraq’s education system has also been devastated. One survey found 92 percent of children had learning disabilities that are largely attributed to the current climate of fear. Over 800,000 children may now be out of school, according to a recent estimate by Save the Children UK—up from 600,000 in 2004. A recent report by the NGO Coordination Committee of Iraq found that many schools have become shelters for internally displaced refugees.

In addition to the physical damage produced by the invasion, a major factor behind the lack of clean water, electricity, health care and other services is the so-called “brain drain” caused by the forced migration of professionals and skilled workers. Thousands of medical staff, water engineers, teachers and other professionals have fled the violence, including by some estimates 80 percent of the professional staff in some universities and hospitals in Baghdad. By the end of 2006, Oxfam notes, as many as 40 percent of these workers had already fled the country.

This is part of the overall refugee crisis. Approximately 40,000-50,000 Iraqis a month are leaving their homes to seek safety outside of Iraq. Syria has around 1.4 million Iraqi refugees, Jordan 750,000, the Gulf States 200,000, Egypt 80,000 and Lebanon 40,000.

According to the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, thousands of internally displaced people without family links or money are living in public buildings and schools where they are at constant risk of eviction, or in hazardous, improvised shelters without water and electricity, or in camps administered by the Iraqi Red Crescent Society. In particular, many of the country’s minority populations—Christians, Assyrians, Yazidis, Turkmens and Kurds—have been forced to flee persecution.

While the report places much of the onus for the persistence of the present crisis on the US-backed regime in Baghdad, Oxfam makes clear that US and Britain—as occupying powers—have violated their legal obligations under the Geneva Conventions to provide material assistance to the population and facilitate humanitarian efforts.

The report notes that US-led coalition forces, along with Iraqi security forces, have regularly interfered with the work of organizations seeking to provide such assistance. During many operations military forces seal off an area, not allowing anybody to enter or leave. “Checkpoints, curfews, road closures, and sudden changes in access to towns and cities for security reasons all pose major constraints on NGOs’ ability to deliver a humanitarian response,” the report notes.

In addition, the report notes, funding for humanitarian assistance from Organization of Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) countries actually fell by 47 percent between 2003 and 2006, to \$453 million. According to a recent Oxfam survey of NGOs operating in Iraq, 80 percent could expand humanitarian work if they had increased funding. Both the International Committee of the Red Cross and the Iraqi Red Crescent Society have recently been forced to launch appeals in order to raise money for their under-funded programs in Iraq.

The Oxfam report, along with a previous study by John Hopkins University which indicates that, by now, more than three-quarters of a million Iraqis have died as a result of the US invasion, makes it clear that the Bush administration and all those who aided and abetted the destruction of Iraqi society are guilty of war crimes, for which they must be held accountable.



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