

Cutbacks to Iraqi food rations threaten malnutrition and starvation

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Under conditions of widespread malnutrition, runaway inflation and mass unemployment, the Iraqi Trade Ministry is preparing to slash the provision of subsidised food and basic hygiene necessities under the Public Distribution System (PDS).

The ministry insists that cutbacks are unavoidable because it has not been promised a sufficient budget for 2008. Mohammed Hanoun, chief-of-staff to the trade minister, told Al Jazeera last month: “In 2007, we asked for \$3.2 billion for rationing basic foodstuffs. But since the price of imported food stuff doubled in the past year, we requested \$7.2 billion. That request was denied.”

Trade Minister Abid Falah al-Soodani told the Iraqi parliament: “Since the government’s financial support will not be available next year, we will reduce the items from 10 to five and the quantities of the remaining items will not be the same as this year and in past years.”

According to Al Jazeera, the first changes will take effect this month. Basic items—baby milk formula, tea, chick-peas, soap and washing detergent—will no longer be given out. Only flour, sugar, rice, cooking oil and powdered milk will be available. The monthly amount will fall, according to UN newsagency IRIN, to just 9 kilograms of flour, 3 kg of rice, 2 kg of sugar, 1 litre of cooking oil and 250 grams of milk powder, per family member covered by a ration card.

A further change will be introduced in June. An income test will be introduced that will essentially strip anyone with a modestly paid job of the ration card needed to receive the monthly hand-out. An estimated five million people will no longer be eligible to use the PDS.

The PDS was introduced by Saddam Hussein’s Baathist regime as a short-term answer to the UN

economic sanctions imposed during the Gulf War of 1990-1991. The food rationing continued after the first US-led war on Iraq, as the UN refused to lift the trade embargo on the grounds that Iraq had to prove it had destroyed its chemical and biological “weapons of mass destruction”.

By late 1996, amid outrage over the humanitarian consequences of the sanctions, the UN established the so-called “oil-for-food” program, in which Iraq was permitted to sell a limited amount of oil to be used to purchase food and essential items, as well as to pay reparations to Kuwait and finance the UN’s own administrative and weapons inspections costs.

While the food ration helped prevent mass starvation, Iraq was unable to purchase essential medical supplies, causing a drastic rise in infant mortality and a sharp fall in overall life expectancy. It is estimated that the sanctions led to as many as one million Iraqi deaths, including 500,000 children, between 1991 and 1998.

Denis Halliday, a UN official responsible for enforcing the regime, resigned in protest in October 1998, declaring: “We are in the process of destroying an entire society. It is as simple and terrifying as that. It is illegal and immoral.”

By the time of the March 2003 invasion, virtually the entire Iraqi population was to some extent reliant on the ration to meet their basic nutritional requirements. The US military occupation therefore had little choice but to continue the program. It has utterly failed, however, to ensure that the population received it.

In 2004, a survey by the World Food Program (WFP) found that at least 6.5 million Iraqis were highly dependent on the food ration and a further 3.9 million would become “food insecure” without it. The WFP estimated that at least 27 percent of Iraqi children were already suffering chronic malnutrition. Many of the

poorest Iraqis were not consuming their ration, but selling part on the market to help get the money necessary for other essentials such as clothes and rent.

More than three years on, Oxfam International estimates that just 60 percent of Iraqis are still able to pick up their ration, compared with 96 percent in 2004. Security concerns prevent large numbers of people from going to nearby distribution centres. Sectarian militias fostered by the US occupation use the allocation of food as part of the systems of patronage they preside over. The WFP has announced this year that it will try to provide emergency food relief to more than 750,000 Iraqis who have been displaced by violence and cannot access the PDS.

Those who can reach distribution centres find that many do not have items in stock due to delivery delays and shortages caused by the wholesale theft. The quantity of food available has fallen by 35 percent under US occupation, according to experts cited by the IRIN UN newsagency. The quality has also sharply deteriorated, with people expected to consume substandard products or items past their expiry date.

At the same time, the social need is glaring. Official unemployment is 17.6 percent, with an additional 38.1 percent of the workforce classified as under employed. Annual inflation is estimated at over 20 percent, down from 52.8 percent in 2006 when the Baghdad government abolished fuel subsidies that once gave Iraqis among the lowest petrol and diesel prices in the world. Oxfam estimates that at least four million people live in what it classifies as “absolute poverty”.

Cutbacks to the food ration will only heighten the immense difficulties facing the population. A health worker told Dahr Jamail of the International Press Service (IPS) last month: “I and my wife have five boys and six girls so the ration costs a lot when it has to be bought. I cannot afford food and also other expenses like study, clothes and doctors.”

Among the most deprived layers of Iraqi society, hundreds of thousands face the prospect of malnutrition and outright starvation. A Baghdad mother of two told Al Jazeera: “If they reduce the quantity of the ration, we will be displaced [made homeless] as the money to pay bills will have to be used for food. If we are considered a poor family today, tomorrow we will be considered absolutely desperate.”

An unemployed man told the newsagency: “Reducing

the number of subsidised items will turn my sons into malnourished children and put us into a level of poverty worse than we have any seen.” Mohammed Falah Ibrahim, a food expert working for the health ministry, warned: “There should be a complementary plan in place to ensure that financial aid reaches those poor families who will be affected by this, otherwise many Iraqis could die of hunger.”

The government of Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki is under pressure to provide sufficient funds in the upcoming budget to maintain the program.

The main Shiite cleric Ali al-Sistani, who is sensitive to dangers of social discontent among the Shiite urban poor, has called for the changes to the ration system to be reversed. His spokesman Abdulmahdi al Karbalaai told *Azzaman* on December 6: “Do they [the government] know that 60 percent of Iraqi people depend on food rations? What will happen to these people if the government goes ahead with its plans? Suffering will aggravate and famine will be on its way in Iraq.”

The Maliki government claims it cannot find additional money to feed the population, but its 2007 budget allocated \$7.3 billion to building up the military and police apparatus which is assisting the American military repress opposition to the occupation—an increase of some 150 percent.

The Bush administration, which is responsible for creating the social catastrophe and spends some \$15 billion a month on maintaining military occupation forces in Iraq and Afghanistan, provides scant humanitarian assistance.



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