

This week in history: April 24-30

This column profiles important historical events which took place during this week, 25 years ago, 50 years ago, 75 years ago and 100 years ago.

23 April 2023

25 years ago: UN Security Council votes to maintain economic sanctions against Iraq

On April 27, 1998, the United Nations Security Council voted unanimously to maintain economic sanctions on Iraq. It was a death sentence for tens of thousands of Iraqi people, the majority of them children, who fell victim to malnutrition and preventable diseases in the following months.

The vote came after a day-long meeting in which representatives of France, Russia, China and several other Security Council members questioned the embargo but in the end bowed to the insistence from the United States, seconded by Great Britain, that the ban on trade remain in effect. US Ambassador Bill Richardson announced before the meeting that he would exercise the US veto against any move to lift the sanctions.

The only concession to Iraq was to speed up the review procedure, which would then be scheduled every 60 days instead of every six months. But none of the five permanent members with veto power—China, France, Russia, Britain and the US—was expected to propose any significant change in the embargo until the next full-scale report from the UN weapons inspectors in Iraq, due the following October.

When some of the Security Council representatives sought to raise the issue of Iraqi deaths, including the Chinese representative Shen Guofeng, they were slapped down by the US and Britain. Perhaps the most cynical and callous statement came from the British ambassador to the United Nations, Sir John Weston, who warned against “shifting the focus from Iraqi compliance to Iraqi suffering.”

The vote came after considerable evidence of Iraqi compliance with UN weapons inspections had been presented to the Security Council. The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), which conducted inspections for nuclear weapons, reported that it found no evidence of an Iraqi atomic weapons program during the previous six months.

The price of six additional months of the embargo in human terms was significant. According to UN figures, the death rate among Iraqi children rose from 7,000 a year in 1989, the last full year before the embargo was imposed, to 57,000 in 1996.

The staggering death toll in Iraq was the product of shortages of food, medicine, medical equipment and safe drinking water, which contributed to ongoing epidemics, including diarrhea, cholera, malaria, typhoid fever and aplastic anemia. Severe dietary deficiency diseases, such as kwashiorkor and marasmus, rarely seen outside of the worst famine disasters like Ethiopia in the 1980s, were frequently noted.

In addition, countless deaths were caused by conditions like asthma and diabetes, which were rarely fatal for children in even moderately advanced societies but which killed many in Iraq because of the lack of steroid inhalants, insulin and other ordinary medical supplies.

50 years ago: New York City police kill 10-year-old boy

On April 28, 1973, police in Queens, New York, shot and killed a 10-year-old boy who was attempting to flee. The following days would see riots in the South Jamaica neighborhood protesting the killing.

The boy, Clifford Glover, had been walking with his stepfather, Add Armstead, when they were approached by two plainclothes police officers who had their pistols drawn. Unaware that they were police, Armstead and Glover ran from the officers believing that they were attempting to rob them. As they fled one of the officers, Thomas Shea, opened fire on them, with two shots hitting and killing Glover.

Shea would claim that the 10-year-old Glover had a weapon, and that was his reason for firing. No such weapon was ever found.

In an interview with the press the day after the shooting, Armstead recalled, “We were walking, not saying anything to each other, and this car pulls up and this white fella opens the door with a gun. He said ‘You black son of a bitches’ and fired.”

Speaking on his relationship with the slain youth, Armstead said, “I’ve loved him like a son. He used to call me daddy.” Neighbors and friends told reporters that Glover would visit Armstead at his job as a mechanic after school and enjoyed learning about the work and helping with small chores.

As news spread of the killing, there was mass anger in the working class South Jamaica neighborhood. Protests turned violent as police attempted to suppress them, and open clashes broke out between the residents and police.

Fourteen police were injured in the days that followed Glover's murder. At least 24 protesters were arrested.

The protests compelled the New York District Attorney's office to press murder charges against Shea. However, the charge was almost immediately reduced to criminally negligent homicide. Shea would be the first New York City police officer ever put on trial for murder while on duty.

It was clear from the outset that the trial was a sham, convened only to formally exonerate Shea. The jury consisted of one black and 11 white jurors in South Jamaica, where the crime took place being predominantly black.

Shea testified that he fired in self-defense, claiming that Glover had "made a reaching motion and I saw what I believed to be a revolver." The trial ended in a verdict of "not guilty" for Shea, allowing him to walk free.

After the conclusion of the trial, demonstrations involving hundreds took place in South Jamaica in protest of the ruling. The "self-defense" claim continues to be used to excuse police of acts of murder.

75 years ago: Zionist forces launch another ethnic cleansing operation targeting Palestinian villages

On April 28, 1948, the Palmach, the paramilitary wing of the largest Zionist militia, the Haganah, launched Operation Yiftach. The aim was to secure control of Safed. The city was strategically crucial as the highest and largest population centre in the mountainous eastern Galilee region.

The attack was part of a broader program, dubbed "Plan Dalet." It was personally requested and proposed by David Ben-Gurion, the Zionist leader who would go on to become the first prime minister of Israel. Under Dalet, Zionist forces scrambled to establish their dominance over as much of Palestine as possible, including through the violent seizure of towns and the dispossession of Arab inhabitants.

The aim was to establish the most favourable "facts on the ground" in the lead-up to the British withdrawal from Palestine in May and the United Nations-sanctioned ethnic partition of the country that would follow.

On April 28, the plans for an offensive were activated, with troops put on alert at a Haganah military camp. In the next couple of days, they began an offensive that openly targeted civilians. As in previous raids on major cities, it began with an assault on a smaller nearby village. From May 1, the Haganah began bombarding Ein al-Zeitun, a small village one kilometre north of Safed.

This included use of the Davidka, an extremely loud mortar device that fired indiscriminately because of its inaccuracy. At least 70 inhabitants of the village were then executed. They appear

to have included a group of 37 young men and boys who had been captured attempting to flee.

The Haganah then launched an offensive directly targeting Safed. It initially failed to take the city's citadel, amid some Arab resistance. Palestinian leaders, together with the British, appealed for a ceasefire. Instead, the Haganah began another onslaught on May 9, including what was described as a "massive, coordinated" mortar bombardment and waves of troops firing heavily on the city. The assault would succeed in taking the city, whose population had previously been majority Palestinian.

100 years ago: Irish Civil War comes to an end

On April 27, 1923, Éamon de Valera, the political leader of the wing of the nationalist Sinn Féin that opposed the Anglo-Irish treaty of 1921 and veteran of the 1916 Easter Rising against British imperialism, called for a ceasefire between his supporters in the Irish Republican Army (IRA) and the National Army of the official British-supported Irish Free State.

An agreement, which ended the Irish War of Independence of 1919-1921 and the subsequent civil war, partitioned the northern province of Ulster. Six mostly Protestant counties in Ulster remained as a part of the United Kingdom, while 26, southern, mostly Catholic, counties joined the Free State. The agreement also gave Britain control of the Free State's foreign policy and required Free State officials to take an oath of allegiance to the British crown.

The anti-Treaty IRA had waged a guerrilla campaign against the Free State since June 1922. It had failed to hold any significant urban center, and the National Army, supplied with British weapons, was able to make military gains.

In January, the Free State began a policy of summary execution of captured anti-Treaty fighters, who subsequently lost key leaders in the conflict, such as Frank Deal, who surrendered and as a prisoner called for a ceasefire. The largest blow to the IRA came when its military leader, Liam Lynch, was killed in action on April 10 in County Tipperary.

De Valera's statement called for the settlement of all questions of Ireland's sovereignty on democratic terms. The Free State government was initially skeptical and rejected de Valera's proposal, noting that he had not offered to turn over IRA arms. On April 30, Lynch's replacement as IRA leader, Frank Aiken, who assumed command of military operations, ordered his troops to suspend operations. He would issue a ceasefire order on May 24 and an order to dump arms, rather than turn them over to the Free State.



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