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## Eyewitness Report

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# Relief mission arrives in Baghdad

by Michael Weissbach

Amidst all the propaganda in preparation for new bombing attacks on Iraq, a quiet but effective and historic mission took off from Frankfurt Airport on July 7. An Ilyushin-76-TD cargo plane loaded with 20 tons of medicine, powdered milk, bandages, equipment for hospital laboratories, and baby food flew to Habbaniya Airport just outside Baghdad.

The U.N.-chartered plane was the first such flight to fly into Baghdad directly since the end of the coalition bombardments and the beginning of the economic sanctions. On board the plane was a four-person delegation of the Committee to Save the Children in Iraq, led by Dr. Fakhoury and Muriel Mirak-Weissbach. The trip meant the end of a weeks-long bureaucratic battle between the committee and many government agencies of various countries which, under clear pressure from the war parties of the "coalition," tried every trick in the book to make this shipment of relief aid impossible.

The delegation's aim was to distribute the relief materials directly to hospitals in Baghdad and also to two cities in the south, Kerbala and Najef. In this undertaking, it received the support of the Health Ministry in Baghdad and of the Chaldean Church of Babylon, whose head, Patriarch Raphael I. Bidawid, was a founding member of the committee two months ago.

In a meeting with the First State Secretary of the Health Ministry on the first day after arrival, the delegation was greeted warmly with the message: We are grateful to you that you are here and for the concrete help you bring us. But the most important thing for you to do is to raise your voices about what you will see in this country and in the hospitals you will visit. All the hospitals are open to you. Take the opportunity to talk to the doctors and the directors of the clinics. You will see what a high standard of health we had, and what not so much the war, but the embargo, is doing to our ability to serve the population. The main targets of this embargo are the 4.5 million Iraqi children under the age of five.

### Baghdad's hospitals

During the next two days, the delegation indeed got a very good look at the hospitals in Baghdad. The medicine and powdered milk and equipment were delivered to five hospitals in Baghdad, two of which were situated in the

poorer quarters of Saddam City, a newly built suburb of 400,000, and Sheikh Omar near the city center.

The main hospital and the 14 associated medical centers in Saddam City serve 5,000 patients per day, 80% of whom are women and children. While before the war, it was a matter of course that every newborn child could get the normal vaccinations against children's diseases, this cannot be maintained under the embargo. The hospital used to be supplied with electric power by three generators, but after 11 months of sanctions, two generators are out of commission, due to lack of spare parts. The air conditioning in the wards is gone, and patients suffer from room temperatures of 30-40° C. Compared with mid-1990, when Saddam City had zero cases of cholera and only a small number of cases of diarrhea or typhus, now the hospital receives three to five cases of cholera per week, and the number of cases of typhus and diarrheal diseases has quadrupled. One thousand cases of Hepatitis A have been reported in the recent period. These are all results of the breakdown of the sewage system and the water supply system.

The director of the hospital, Dr. Qasim Ismail, reported that they are in need of all basic medicines. There is very little vaccine left, no insulin for diabetes, no medicine for typhus or high blood pressure or thyroid disease. Laboratory testing has come to a halt, and even tubing, syringes, and fluids for infusions are no longer available. "Without the supply of these basic medical substances, many people just die before our eyes, as we are made incapable of helping them. . . . Only the lifting of the embargo will eventually change this situation," he said.

Many of the doctors met by the delegation had studied in Europe or the United States. Everyone expressed pride in the standard Iraq's health system had achieved up to the war. International public health experts had judged that Iraqi health standards had reached and even overtaken the level of some of the European countries.

### Bombed-out areas

The delegation also went to the main hospital of Kerbala, where the Iranian-instigated rebellion of Shiite groups had devastated large parts of the city of 500,000, and had also destroyed the two upper stories of the hospital. "The civil war has created total chaos for us. We can only use the first floor for emergency operations," reported a doctor who had worked in Germany up until a few years before. A truckload of medicine, milk powder, and 200 beds from Sweden was gratefully received.

The 11 months of embargo and 45 days of heavy bombardment did not break the morale of the Iraqi population. The will to resist and survive this hideous onslaught of the Western allies against a Third World country is still strong. To save the children of Iraq through lifting the embargo and restoring the necessary infrastructure must be the aim of all people of good will.