

Airlift aims to save Iraqi children

by Nancy Spannaus

At a Nov. 18 press conference held in the Baghdad office of the Red Crescent Society, spokesmen for the Committee to Save the Children in Iraq announced the delivery of 16.5 tons of relief goods to Iraq. The goods, organized by the Letter of James-Food for Peace and several Swedish organizations, arrived on the first flight of civilian Iraqi Airways since the war, which flew from Stockholm to Amman, Jordan on Nov. 15.

Speaking for the committee, Mrs. Muriel Mirak-Weissbach told the packed press conference that the flight was important not only for the goods which it brought in, but also for paving the way for the resumption of normal Iraqi trade with the rest of the world. This flight had to receive special approval from Sweden, to provide the landing rights for Iraqi Airways, and also from the U.N. Sanctions Committee. But the lifting of the embargo is the most essential step toward relieving the health and food crises for the Iraqi population.

This shipment from Sweden is expected to be followed by an extraordinary gift of powdered milk from American farmers to Iraqi children. As of Nov. 21, five tons of milk, packed in crates marked "Gift from American dairy farmers to Iraqi children," was expected to arrive in Baghdad for delivery to the needy. Dozens of dairy farmers throughout the U.S. decided to undertake this "milk lift" as an alternative to dumping dairy products to protest devastating low prices. The action was facilitated by the Committee to Save the Children in Iraq and the Chaldean Catholic Church of the United States.

The Committee to Save the Children in Iraq was formed in the early spring of 1991, with the aim of preventing the death of millions of Iraqis, which could be foreseen following the wanton destruction of their country's infrastructure in the war. The leading members include: His Beatitude Rafael I Bidawid, Patriarch of the Chaldean Church of Babylon; Helga

Zepp-LaRouche, president of the Schiller Institute, Germany; Prof. Dr. Hans Koechler, president of the International Progress Organization, Vienna; Amelia Robinson, civil rights leader, U.S.A.; Massimo Pini, Member of Parliament, Switzerland; Dr. Reza Sabri-Tabrizi of Edinburgh University; Michael Hare-Duke, bishop of St. Andrews, Scotland; Prof. Michael Dummett of Oxford University; Prof. John Bell of Leeds University; Prof. Francis Boyle of the University of Illinois; Monsignor Paul O'Bryne, bishop of Calgary, Canada; and Monsignor Crowley, auxiliary bishop of Montreal.

So far, the committee has organized three major shipments of primarily medical supplies into Iraq, and arranged for the medical treatment of 22 Iraqi children in Germany. The more humanitarian aid it provides, however, the more convinced it is that genocide against 18 million Iraqis will only be stopped by a total lifting of the embargo, better described as a blockade.

Deadline: December 2

The next meeting of the U.N. Sanctions Committee, which will review maintaining the embargo against Iraq, will occur on Dec. 2. The outcome of that meeting will determine how many more thousands of Iraqi young and sick are going to die for lack of food and medical treatment.

The annual meeting of the U.N. Food and Agriculture Organization, held Nov. 14 in Rome, reviewed the Iraq situation, among others. It noted the recent FAO mission's confirmation of "a deterioration in the food and nutrition situation."

Iraqi Agriculture Minister Abdul-Wahab al-Sabagh told the press that the government was currently only managing to provide one-quarter of the food needs of the population at subsidized prices. And he expects total agricultural production in 1991 to be only 75% of last year's. "If this embargo

continues, it will lead to the death of thousands of children and old people," he said.

Sabagh said that Iraq has only been allowed to import 100,000 tons of grain since the end of the war, whereas it used to import 200,000 tons a month. That is largely due to lack of available funds, still pent up in confiscated bank accounts in the West. It is reliably reported that the U.S. government won't even let the Iraqis use their seized assets in U.S. banks to buy U.S.-produced food.

The larger problem comes from the inability of Iraq to import anything but food and medicine. As Sadagh said, "Today we have a great lack of food and medicines. We lack spare parts for agricultural machinery. We lack fertilizers and pesticides, as well as spares to get our power stations and oil refineries working again. We are a country that lives in the dark because of the destruction of our power stations. We have many rivers, but we need pumps to bring the water to the fields, and these require electricity which we do not have."

Goods delivered

The contents of the Nov. 15 shipment by the Committee to Save the Children in Iraq were primarily medical equipment, including 48 hospital beds, 10 operating tables, 67 wheel chairs, 8,000 syringes, and the like. They were donated by the Swedish relief groups Erikshjælpen, Star of Hope, and Laerkarmissionen.

Speaking to journalists at a press conference in Stockholm's Arlanda Airport prior to takeoff, committee coordinator Muriel Mirak-Weissbach said: "The most recent reports indicate that the worst predictions, regarding the deadly effects of the ongoing embargo were, if anything, too optimistic. An increase of 380% in infant mortality, calculated by the International Study Team in October, means, what we are seeing in Iraq is genocide. People, particularly children, are dying like flies, for no other reason than that vital food and medicine, and equipment for electricity generation and water purification, are being withheld through the sanctions policy.

"What is significant in our flight today is not only the 16.5 tons of excellent hospital equipment donated by Swedish organizations, but the fact that for the first time since the war, a plane of Iraqi Airways is delivering these life-saving goods. If the Iraqi civilian fleet, many of its aircraft currently grounded outside Iraq, were to be mobilized in an international relief effort, with direct flights into Iraq, significant help could be provided. Ultimately, however, it is only by lifting the embargo that the Iraqi population can be saved from annihilation. Today's flight is an important step in the process of lifting the embargo."

The health situation

While in Iraq to deliver the relief goods, committee representatives were received by Vice Minister of Health Shoky, who expressed his gratitude for the work of the committee,

which, he said, unlike many groups that make big promises, is actually doing something important.

Shoky reported that, although cholera is abating due to cooler weather, cases of hepatitis have shown a five-fold increase since July, and typhoid and polio, among other diseases, are spreading rapidly. Due to the lack of vaccines, such contagious diseases cannot be prevented, and due to lack of medicine, they cannot be adequately treated. He said that doctors are being forced to apply triage—something ethically and humanly unacceptable.

The minister stressed that the lack of simple anesthetics means that cesarean sections cannot be performed, leading to maternal and infant deaths. Anesthetics can't be produced in Iraq either, due to the policy of the Sanctions Committee, which claims that Iraq will use the ingredients to fabricate chemical weapons. A similar "reasoning" is used to prevent Iraq from producing DDT, and the result is a proliferation of mosquitoes and malaria.

The milk lift

Organizing against the blockade strangling Iraq has not yet become a popular issue in the nations of Europe and North America. A bill introduced by Texas Democratic Congressman Henry Gonzalez, which calls for an end to the sanctions, has only six sponsors. The issue has been raised in the Canadian, Swiss, British, and European parliaments—only to be effectively shunted aside.

But a movement has been touched off among American dairy farmers which is showing tremendous promise in shifting the apathetic, "me first" mood of many U.S. citizens.

The movement began with 20 farmers in eight states, who, in consultation with Phil Valenti of the Committee to Save the Children in Iraq, decided that they wanted to dramatize the plight of the family dairy farmer in the United States. They decided there was no better way to demonstrate the need to save the farmer, than to provide milk to starving children.

Farmers and farm publications have been spreading the word of the milk lift movement, especially in the Midwest and Northeast. The Nov. 7 edition of the official newspaper of a Midwest Catholic Diocese editorially endorsed the movement, commending the farmers for their action. The premier national publication of the dairy industry, *Hoard's Dairyman*, covered the milk lift in its November 1991 issue.

The dairy farmers' movement received a boost from the Philadelphia branch of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, which passed a support resolution on Nov. 16. The group resolved that it "expresses appreciation for the action of those dairy farmers trying to feed starving children, and offers the hand of fellowship and solidarity to the independent family farmers of America."

The milk powder will be the first American-produced powder to be delivered to Iraq, as other relief agencies have purchased milk in Jordan for easier delivery.