

Iraq three years after the war: genocide in a test tube

by Muriel Mirak-Weissbach

On July 16, the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) and the World Food Program issued a paper reporting on the findings which a mission of the two U.N. organizations had completed in Iraq. "The vast majority of the Iraqi population lives in absolutely deplorable conditions," it read, and is condemned to "a struggle for survival." The country as a whole is in a "pre-famine" situation. The mission estimates that, in order to feed its population, Iraq would have to import 5.4 million tons of basic foodstuffs, at a cost of \$2.5 billion. "This significant sum cannot be covered by the international community," the report comments tersely.

Translated into plain English, the report says that a country of 18 million people, as a result of its having been subjected to three years of a hostile blockade, is about to enter the spiral of starvation. Because the U.N. Security Council reiterated on July 22 its commitment to uphold the embargo, Iraq will not be able to sell oil or any other commodity to any trade partners. Therefore, although food and medicine are officially excluded from the embargo, Iraq will not be allowed to generate the income which it requires to finance food purchases. The "international community," which, translated from bureaucratese, means the United Nations, is bankrupt and will not put up the funds for humanitarian shipments. Even those deliveries of food and medicine which have been authorized by the U.N. Sanctions Committee, have been subjected to systematic harassment, or even piracy, by the fleet of "sanctions enforcers" stationed in the Red Sea. The U.S.-led multinational force has intercepted 17,000 ships, boarded and searched 5,000, and has diverted at least 400, according to U.S. Central Command data, since August 1990.

The cynical politics of oil

A compromise formula elaborated by the U.N. has been tossed back and forth across the negotiating table since September 1991, whereby Iraq would be allowed to sell \$1.6 billion worth of oil, solely to finance such imports (after having given about half to the U.N. for its excellent services on the ground and for reparations to the cash-strapped Kuwaitis); but even this trick, meant to fill the U.N.'s empty coffers, might have undesired effects on the price of oil. Already in June, the mere rumor that the sanctions might be lifted, allowing Iraq to start pumping oil again, sufficed to

bring the North Sea Brent price down \$5. A Gulf study, published in the United Arab Emirates Oil Ministry magazine *Oil and Industry News*, worried that Gulf states' oil earnings projected at \$81.3 billion in 1993, compared with \$77.2 billion in 1992, "could decline in case Iraq is allowed to resume production."

Furthermore, in the negotiations on U.N. Resolutions 706 and 712, which reopened July 7, Iraq demanded that the oil exports be shipped through the northern Persian Gulf terminal of Mina Al Bakr, and not only through the Turkish pipeline, as the U.N. desires. Baghdad demanded, in addition, that it be allowed to sell more than the \$1.6 billion worth of oil, and that it be able to use the \$4-6 billion in frozen assets abroad for purchase of food and medical supplies.

Regardless of the outcome of the talks on a one-shot sale, U.N. policy is that the sanctions will remain in place. No matter that the original condition set with the U.N. resolution introducing sanctions on Aug. 6, 1990, that Iraq withdraw from Kuwait, has been met. Since the end of the military confrontation, ever more onerous conditions have been invented to justify the continuing blockade: Saddam Hussein was to "step down"; Iraq was to "fulfill all the U.N. resolutions," even as new ones were being formulated and rammed through; Saddam Hussein was to "behave," to eliminate weapons of mass destruction, to allow long-term surveillance of industrial activity, and so on. Most Americans, whose whims are periodically shaped by the public opinion polls, express their feeling that the sanctions are "right" because Saddam Hussein is a "bully," a "dictator," "intractable," or simply, still in power.

The toll of the embargo

The Iraqi people are being subjected to genocide of a unique type. It can be compared to the same processes unleashed by financial speculation, usury, and austerity, associated with the International Monetary Fund (IMF), for example, processes which have led over 10 or 20 years, in the cases of Ibero-America and Africa, to genocidal conditions. The difference is that in Iraq's case, this process has been put into motion by military attack, which knocked out the economic infrastructure, followed by economic strangulation, which is killing the population, undermining its ability to reproduce itself. In Iraq, the drama is unfolding at a highly



An infant formula factory destroyed in Iraq during the war. According to an unpublished cited UNICEF report, "more than 100,000 additional children (above expected rates) have died since the beginning of the Gulf war."

accelerated tempo. The destruction which it has taken the IMF one or two decades to accomplish in most Third World countries has been wrought in Iraq in three years.

How this happened is straightforward: The embargo stopped all air traffic to and from the country, leaving one main land route through Jordan as the connection to the outside world. It grounded the entire civilian airplane fleet. Trade was halted, except for medicines; even food was not allowed in until March 22, 1991. Food became scarce in a country which had used its oil revenues to import 70% of its food needs. Despite deliberate increases in internal food production by bringing more land under cultivation, which increased the 1991 wheat acreage planted by 80%, the embargo limited this by blocking imports of fertilizer, seed, and spare parts for agricultural vehicles. According to an unpublished report for Unicef written in April 1993, this meant that the harvest was reduced "to an estimated 25-30% of the previous year's level."

Agriculture was further damaged by reduced irrigation, due to irregular electricity supplies. The predominantly agricultural economy in the northern Kurdish region has been decimated by "acute shortage of certified seeds, fertilizers, herbicides, pesticides and fuel." The lack of veterinary services and supplies has led to epidemic among herds, including rinderpest. Lack of feed and electricity have virtually eliminated poultry and dairy production. In Erbil, out of 300 functioning poultry farms in 1990, only two remain.

Food prices skyrocketed. The same report calculates that the market price for a food basket of 3,000 kcal per person for a family of six rose from 500 Iraqi dinars in January 1991 to 1,000 dinars in January 1992, and to 2,500 dinars in January 1993. In the same period, the average monthly salary rose only from 250 dinars to under 500. Thus, "Food prices have increased by more than 50-fold since August 1990, while salaries have risen by only 1-2 fold," according to the report. In addition to the devaluation of the currency due to the cancellation of trade—whereby the Iraqi dinar no longer was recognized abroad—financial speculation targeted the dinar. Since Iraq could not import, it produced its own banknotes, with the result that foreign speculators hoarded foreign-produced 25-dinar notes, and traded them outside the country. This drove down the value of the domestically produced banknotes, further eroding buying power, until the government in May 1993 declared the foreign-made notes null and void, and closed the border to Jordan temporarily, to reestablish control over currency.

The combination of monetary devaluation and scarcity-induced inflation of basic goods prices has resulted in a fall in per capita income. According to the unpublished Unicef report, "Per capita income was estimated at \$335 in 1988 (using the free market exchange rate) and fell to \$65 in 1991, and \$44 in 1992. This is far below the international poverty line of \$100 established by the World Bank. Dreze and Gazdar ('Hunger and Poverty in Iraq,' 1991) found that, in terms

of private income, the prevalence of poverty is now greater in Iraq than in India, with the majority of Iraqi households earning below the poverty line." In 1988, only half of family income was used for food purchases, but by 1993, every dinar was needed for food, and that does not suffice. Except for the tiny percentage of very wealthy Iraqis, the population depends on food rations, which provide 1,550 kcals per day per person, or about two-thirds of daily energy requirements.

Effects on the population

To make up the difference between rations and real needs, families are forced to seek any kind of income-generating activity for purchases on the black market. In the first year after the war, reports abounded of wealthy and middle-class women selling jewelry and dowry items for cash, to cover bare necessities. This cushion is largely gone. As a result, thousands have been forced to enter the illegal economy. The London *Financial Times* on May 6 reported on the common sight of Iraqi women sitting on the curbstones in Jordan's capital Amman, selling black market cigarettes. To do so, they must travel 14-17 hours by car or bus from Baghdad to Amman every couple of weeks. Other women have resorted to prostitution. Inside Iraq, child labor, once unheard of, has become commonplace, and school dropouts, particularly among girls from families headed by a widowed mother, have increased correspondingly. Ministry of Education statistics cited by the Unicef report indicate that 2.5% of students dropped out of primary school in 1989-90, 3% in 1990-91, but 14% in 1991-92. Street children, who did not exist before the war, have appeared, especially in the cities, begging.

The impact of pauperization and insufficient caloric intake has been massive on the physical and psychological condition of the population. First, in outright mortality, the cited Unicef report calculates that "more than 100,000 additional children (above expected rates) have died since the beginning of the Gulf war." The International Study Team estimated that mortality rates for infants and children under five were 2.4 and 2.7 times their pre-war levels, respectively. Infant mortality begins at birth or before. Due to dramatically reduced medical services since the embargo, pre-natal care has suffered. Increases in miscarriages, abortions, premature births, and low-birth weight babies are the result. The percentage of babies born below 2.5 kilograms rose from 4.5% in 1990 to 10.8% in 1991 and to 16.8% in 1992, according to a study presented at an international conference in Baghdad in 1992. In addition, the lack of general anesthetics led to massive increases in deaths of both mother and child, particularly in cases where the mother required a caesarean section.

The rise in infant and under-five mortality derives also from malnutrition, diarrhea, infectious diseases like cholera, typhoid, and measles. Vaccines have been blocked by the embargo, as have medicines required for treatment. Water

supplies have been contaminated, leading to the rapid spread of infectious diseases. Although in 1992, the government made significant progress in repairing water and sanitation installations, the often makeshift repairs could not endure without new spare parts. Prevented by the embargo from receiving spare parts, the water systems have broken down. "In Basra, a visit by Unicef in January 1993 revealed that of 135 sewage pumps, only 25 were operational. Of the 27,000 liters of sewage pumped into the Tigris River every second, 17,000 are discharged untreated. The team found that garbage collection services had virtually collapsed due to lack of spare parts and vehicles. Overflow of raw sewage had caused flooding in many residential areas."

If the physical toll of the embargo can be calculated in crude percentages, the psychological cost is far more difficult to express. One indicator is a poll taken in 1992 among primary schoolchildren, which recorded the highest levels of psychological stress and pathological behavior ever set down by specialists, in a decade of such investigation in areas marred by conflict. According to this report by Raundalen and Dyregrov, 62% of the children questioned answered affirmatively to the question, "Do you worry you may not live to be an adult?" Seventy-nine percent said "yes," when asked, "Are you afraid of losing your family?"

A vast majority of women questioned also indicated psychological problems, ranging from insomnia to headaches and depression.

In August 1991, a task force headed by Sadruddin Aga Khan, who was Executive Delegate for the United Nations secretary general at the time, in charge of humanitarian aid to Iraq, concluded that unless some arrangement were made to allow Iraq to generate income with which to purchase food and medicine, the country would enter a dramatic crisis. The U.N. official said that what was threatened was a process which, if not reversed, would lead to famine. Now, in 1993, that specter of famine has appeared on the horizon. Over the last three years, the Iraqi population has been progressively stripped of its ability to produce. Physically, its resistance has been undermined by malnutrition, and in physical-economic terms, its ability to reproduce itself is being threatened. Now it may starve, as the FAO admits.

Yet, in 1988, Iraq was ranked as a relatively wealthy country. Its average caloric food intake was 3,340 kcal, well over the allowance recommended by the World Health Organization. Iraq was a take-off economy, about to enter a fully industrialized stage of its development.

Despite a moral resistance that defies comparison, which has been shown by the Iraqis since 1990, it is clear that the only way that the country will survive and its people flourish, is through the lifting of the genocidal embargo. Whether or not the U.S. administration prefers a healthy, growing Iraqi economy and people, or another moral catastrophe to chalk up to foreign policy failures, will be seen in the attitude it assumes vis-à-vis this horrendous human drama.