

Horrifying Conditions

More than two year after the war of “liberation” of Iraq and of “reconstruction” efforts, living conditions in Iraq are even worse than the most horrifying conditions during the 1990s era of United Nations sanctions.

The talk about “contracting” to “rebuild” Iraq is a big lie. Most of the building that has taken place is in and around U.S. military bases and airports, and the largest share of “contracting” is with foreign private security firms (mercenaries) to protect Iraqi officials and installations and foreign contractors active in Iraq. According to a July 29 report in the *Washington Post*: “the Pentagon estimates there are 60 private security firms with as many as 25,000 employees in Iraq. Some elite personnel make \$33,000 a month”—a large sum, by Iraqi standards.

Many projects related to the rehabilitation of Iraq’s electricity grid were dumped by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers to save money for security for other existing electricity stations. Security contracts cost billions of dollars each year.

A June 2005 United Nations Development Program (UNPD) survey of living conditions in 2004 was correctly described as “tragic” by an Iraqi minister. In short, the report indicates that the Iraqi people are suffering from a threatening shortage of jobs, housing, health care, electricity, and clean water. The situation in 2005 is even worse than in 2004, but no statistics are yet available.

The UNDP survey reveals that 85% of Iraqi households lack stable electricity. This means they have electric power about 3-6 hours per day. Only 54% have access to clean water. In other words, 46% of Iraqis have to use polluted river and well water. Only 37% of Iraqi households had access to sewage treatment. This was almost unthinkable during the 1980s and most of the 1990, despite two devastating wars.

A ‘Major Deterioration’

“If you compare this to the situation in the 1980s, you will see a major deterioration of the situation,” said

Barham Salih, Minister of Planning in the current Iraqi government, pointing out that 75% of households had clean water two decades ago. The survey put the unemployment figure at 18.4%, but Salih explained that “underemployment” topped the 50% mark. The truth of the matter is that unemployment has reached 70%, but people get paid little sums of money in U.S. dollars to keep the statistics pretty.

The survey estimates that the number of Iraqis who have died since the U.S.-led invasion of 2003 is somewhere between 18,000 and 29,000. Of those deaths, 12% were children under 18 years of age, meaning that between 2,100 and 3,500 children have been killed in the war thus far. According to the description in an IPS news service report on the survey, “In a country where almost half the population of 27.1 million people is less than 18 years old, some of the most startling findings relate to youth.”

Nearly one-fourth of Iraqi children aged between six months and five years are chronically malnourished, meaning that they have stunted growth, the report says. Among all Iraqi children, more than one in ten suffers from general malnutrition, meaning they have a low weight for their age. Another 8% have acute malnourishment, or low weight for their height. In some areas of the country, acute malnourishment reaches 17% and stunting reaches 26%, the report says.

Both infant and child mortality rates appear to have been steadily increasing over the past 15 years. At present, 32 babies out of every 1,000 born alive die before reaching their first birthday.

In addition, 37% of young men with secondary or higher education are unemployed, and only 83% of boys and 79% of school-age girls are enrolled in primary school. The UNICEF reported in 2003 that, “the education system in Iraq, prior to 1991, was one of the best in the region, with over 100% Gross Enrollment Rate for primary schooling and high levels of literacy, both of men and women. The Higher Education, especially the scientific and technological institutions, was of an international standard, staffed by high quality personnel.”

—Hussein Askary

This is what the dispute within the Iraqi circle was about: making deals, not drafting a lasting constitution. It is not clear what the American Ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad was upset about. Is it that the glorious deadline of Aug. 15 was not met, that would have given the Bush Administration a reason to rejoice? Or is it that he lost control over the discussions, which could result in turning Iraq into “another theocratic state” in the region?

On Aug. 14, the Arabic daily *Al-Hayat* cited Kurdish representative in the Constitution Drafting Commission Mahmoud Othman as saying, “The Americans presented a copy of a detailed and complete draft of a constitution.” *Al-Hayat* also reported from sources, that Khalilzad was present during the discussion in order to know the latest developments. According to these sources, Khalilzad demanded that the Aug. 15 deadline should be met even if the constitution