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Collapsing Health Care System: Silent Death in Iraq

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The US backed AlSabaah newspaper published in Baghdad reported on the Medical Drugs situation in Iraq. In its article "Medical centers suffers a decline in the number of patients" published 6 June 2005, it draws a very gloomy picture of the medical services in Iraq more than 2 years after the occupation.

The article states that: "A team of experts recently assessed the medical drugs situation and found out an alarming (fearful) shortage of certain drugs". The report stated that out of 900 basic drugs needed 401 (45%) of them are totally unavailable while another 350 (39%) drugs are in a very short supply and what is available would last for only "few week".

The report did not mention the stock situation of the other 149 (17%).The report quoting the Ministry of Health as saying that the ministry could not provide 26 (81%) drugs out of 32 drugs used for the treatment of patients with chronic illness. Those are patients with illness like diabetes, hypertension, cardiac diseases that must be maintained for a long time on medications.

The report states that large quantities of "anesthetic drugs, antibiotics and cancer treatment drugs disappeared". Ministry of health sources attributed the situation to the chaotic situation resulting from the reorganization of the ministry of health after the occupation as well as the problems between the ministry of health, the ministry of finance and the banks causing a delay in opening letters of credits needed to import drugs.

Dr. Ali Abdul Hussein, director of Al-Noor medical center in Baghdad, was quoted as saying that the most prominent problem faced in this center is the shortage of certain drugs as well as the unavailability of others. This has created problems with patients and their families. He goes on to say that drugs supplied to the medical center would last only 10 days of every month.

Similar complaints were echoed by Dr. Reid Al-Marouh, the assistant director of Al-Mustansyreah specialist medical clinic in Baghdad. The center is attended by an average of 300 patients a day most of them are sent home with prescription to buy from the private pharmacies because the center lacks most of the drugs. The drugs supplied would only last one to two weeks a month. Sometimes the have even shortages of simple drugs like Aspirin or Paracetamol.

During the 1980s the government established "Martyr court" pharmacies which were supplied with certain type of drugs to be sold (rather than given free at the hospitals). These types of government run pharmacies were another source of medical drugs Iraqis depended on. It continued to fill the shortages during the 13 years of sanctions.

According to Dr. Jawad Abdulallah of "Martyr court" pharmacy No. 4 in Baghdad the pharmacy "became just a word with no meaning" because we are unable to supply drugs that are unavailable at other pharmacies as we used to do. He was quoted as saying "We do not have drugs to regulate the hormones, or infertility drugs, or high potency antibiotics". Dr. Abdulallah attributes the problem to the Ministry of Health.

The article published in the U.S. backed newspaper covers only the question of the availability, more precisely the unavailability, of medical drugs after 2 years of occupation. Several reports were published concerning the catastrophic condition of hospitals as a result of the occupation. The chaotic security conditions and the lack of effective functioning government contributed further to deteriorating medical services. Doctors at hospitals were attacked by frustrated patients or even by the American trained Iraqi National Guards. Doctors were threatened or kidnapped forcing many of the highly qualified doctors to quit and leave the country.

The destruction of the essential services like clean water, sewage, electricity are contributing to spread of diseases. This means more people require medical services which puts more pressure on the already poorly functioning health system.

According to WHO reports Health Situation in Iraq (1990) was "one of the best in the Middle-East Region.". The UN report states that "Before August 1990, the health care system in Iraq was based on an extensive and developed network of primary, secondary and tertiary health care facilities. These facilities were linked among themselves and with the community by a large fleet of ambulances and service vehicles, and by a good communications network facilitating referral to the next level of the health care system. It was estimated by the Government of Iraq (GOI) that 97% and 79% of the urban and rural populations, respectively, had access to health care. While the system tended to emphasize curative aspects, it was complemented by a set of public health activities that included, among others, malaria control, an expanded programme of immunizations (EPI) and tuberculosis control activities."

The decline in the health service standards from what it was in 1990 have resulted in the death of no less than 500,000 children under the age of 5 years due to the UK-USA sanctions. A further decline in health services as a result of the current occupation is causing the silent death of thousands of innocent civilians mostly children. This chaotic health system can not be justified under any circumstances. I think UK USA stands for "United to Kill US All"– this time silently. Now they do not have Saddam to blame!!!! Would they have the courage to blame themselves or their client state? I don't think so.

Ghazwan Al-Mukhtar is a medical engineer living in occupied Baghadad. You can respond to this column on his blog spot on www.DemocracyRising.US .

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