

Dedicated to Madeleine Albright, on Behalf of the Children of Iraq, whose Lives were a “Price Worth It.”

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Global Research, May 13, 2011
13 May 2011

Theme: [Crimes against Humanity](#), [US NATO War Agenda](#)

Dedicated to Madeleine Albright, on Behalf of the Children of Iraq, whose Lives were a “Price Worth It.” (“60 Minutes”, 12th May 1996.)

“ ... war in our time is always indiscriminate, a war against innocents, a war against children.” Howard Zinn. (1922-2010.)

It was Kathy Kelly – relentlessly, lovingly, committed to the people of Iraq, constantly risking the draconian wrath, jail terms, and impossible fines of the US., government for her compassion – who alerted me. The ‘phone rang, it was 12th May 1996, and Kathy was calling from Chicago, stunned. Madeleine Albright, then US., Ambassador to the UN., had just appeared on “Sixty Minutes.”

Lesley Stahl, said Kathy, had said, of the US., driven embargo on Iraq: “We have heard that a half million children have died. I mean, that’s more children than died in Hiroshima. And, you know, is the price worth it?” Albright had responded: “I think this is a very hard choice, but the price—we think the price is worth it.”

Some things really are indelibly seared in to memory. I remember a feeling of disbelief; somehow even the meticulous Kathy must have some way misconstrued. Was there any way she could fax me a transcript I asked, in those, for most, pre-home computer days. Magically, she obtained one within the hour. Reading it, the images of the children I had watched helplessly, their lives ebbing away, for want of embargoed medicines, treatments, frequently the ability to perform vital surgery, flooded my mind.

I thought of the sudden look of hope, in the eyes of parents sitting by the bed of a child, as one walked in to the ward. One was from outside Iraq, perhaps there was some miracle one could work, then the look died. As did so, so, many of the small, frail little souls, their lives snatched away. Now I knew that they were a “price” that was “worth it.” And with it, the realization that total evil really exists.

Iraq imported seventy percent of virtually everything. On Hiroshima Day 1990, with the implementation of the embargo rational life ended. From school books, to childrens’ toys, lipstick to sanitary items, washing up liquid to shampoo, normality died. But it was the health sector, formerly possibly the finest in the Middle East, free to all, which was uniquely devastated. After the 1991 bombing, it was – literally – largely in ruins.

The viciousness with which the UN., Sanctions Committee acted, made a mockery of the fine founding words of their Charter in general and the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child in particular. From incubators to paediatric syringes, cancer medications to dialysis machines and equipment, from pain killers to scalpels, anti-biotics to asthma inhalers, all were vetoed.

Six months before Albright's pronouncement, in December 1995, Sara Zaidi and Mary Smith Fawzi of the Center for Economic and Social Rights and the Harvard School of Public Health, wrote to the Lancet, pointing out that by August 1991, just one year in to the embargo: "baseline mortality for the under five population rose from 43.2 to 128.5 per 1,000, reflecting a three fold increase in child mortality." In their further survey (1995) under the auspices of UN., Food and Agricultural Organization: "the under five mortality rate increased five-fold." Stunting and wasting had become prevalent in a country where food was formerly cheap and plentiful.

I first went to Iraq after the 1991 bombing, less a year later, and within a couple of hours witnessed the reality behind the statistics. In what had been a flagship teaching hospital, I watched a young nurse, frantically trying to clear the throat of a perfect, new born baby boy, his young parents standing, their faces frozen with terror. A friend, a doctor from Scotland was with me, she looked round and said: "In a situation like this, in near any hospital, you know where the vital items will be, there is nothing here." We watched helplessly, as the little mite turned, white, grey, near blue, and lost his fledgling fight for life, as the sun streamed through broken, bomb damaged windows. The glass factories had been bombed – and glass too was vetoed. The baby had died for little more than cents worth of basic, plastic suction.

By 1993, mothers too malnourished to breast feed and unable to afford milk powder, fed their babies on sugared water, or sugared black tea. Virtually all became bloated, chronically malnourished and died. Doctors created a new diagnosis. They called them: "the sugar babies."

For children who survived, experts on children in war zones, warned that this was possibly the most traumatized child population on earth. With the austerity, the ongoing (illegal) bombings by the US., and UK., they had no way to recover from their experiences.

An unforgettable example was a child of about five, in a small grocery store, early one morning. He came in, in the proud mode of children everywhere, entrusted with an important errand. He bought one egg. At the time, a tray of eggs cost a university Professor's monthly salary. To go to a meal and find minute pieces of egg in it, was to be honoured indeed. The child carried it carefully to the door – and dropped it. He fell to his knees, trying to scrape it up up in his hands, tears streaming down his face. I reached in to my pocket, the shop keeper tapped him on the shoulder and gave him another one.

Two more children that were "worth" the "price", were suffering from acute myeloid leukaemia, bleeding internally, covered in bruises from their leaking capillaries and in intractable pain. There was no pain relief. The younger one, aged three, was lying rigid, his eyes full of unshed tears. He had taught himself not to cry, since it wracked his agonized little body further. I turned away, unable to take a picture, or take notes, just wanting to comfort him; but to touch would have brought further agony.

Near the door, I bent to stroke the head of the older child, just five. In a gesture which must have cost him the unimaginable, he responded as children everywhere, to affection, and squeezed my hand tightly. I wrote at the time: "I walked from the ward, leant against the wall, and knew that it was actually possible to die of shame."

Ms Albright would have been no doubt, pleased at the progress of her project in Basra. On one visit to the paediatric and maternity hospital, dear friend, Dr Jenan Hussein came running out to hug me. Then a moment's silence, and I had a near premonition. She said: "Felicity, you know those children you wrote about in June?" (It was November) "I am sorry, they have all died." They were seventeen babies in the premature baby unit, without even oxygen. (Vetoed.)

That was the visit when I nearly lost the plot. I walked in to one ward and a group of distraught women, aunts, grandmothers, were standing by a cot, of another perfect new born, who had just died. The mother had rushed from the unit beside herself in grief. I asked if I could hold the tiny still warm being. "Please, of course." I put him over my shoulder, stroked his head, back, certain I could bring him back to life, he was warm, fluid, total. How long I stroked his small form, willing him back, I do not know. Finally, defeated, I laid him down, wrapped him and we wept together.

Further down the corridor was another new born. He was in an incubator, wrapped in blankets, since the incubator did not work (replacements vetoed) in the looking glass world Iraq had become. He needed an exchange transfusion, premature and yellow with jaundice as he was. I thought I had the blood type needed and offered mine if they checked to be sure, since wrong blood is as lethal as no blood. There were no facilities to check. Vetoed. My premature son had been saved by an exchange transfusion. I looked in to the mother's eyes and resonated with her agony. We, the doctors, the baby, were all as helpless as each other.

As cancers soared (children in the mid 90's were sometimes born with cancer - an unheard of phenomenon) cancer treatments were vetoed. The cancer has been linked to the weapons used, especially depleted uranium.

The UK Atomic Energy Authority in a "self initiated" Report, estimated that if fifty tonnes of the residual dust remained after the 1991 hostilities, there would be half a million excess cancer deaths by 2000. In fact the highest estimates of that left is 700 tonnes. In 1998 a John Hopkins University study estimated that if cancers continued on the current curve, 44% of the population would develop it by 2000.

The 2003 blitzkrieg may have left 2,000- 3,000 further tonnes of DU. For years many couples have feared having children, given the equal epidemic of birth defects, as would be expected if nuclear waste is dropped on populations.

I have written much of Jassim, the child poet, who, hearing I was a writer, glowed with delight, and took a note book from under his pillow in the cancer ward he was lying in. Could he read me his poem? Of course:

"The name is love

The class is mindless

The school is suffering

The government is sadness

The city is sighing

The street is misery

The home number is one thousand sighs. "

"Jassim", I said, finally finding my voice, if you can write this at thirteen, think what you will do at twenty. I asked if I could use his poem and credit him. He was thrilled. He never saw it in print, in many places and languages. He died before an aid agency could get the medications he needed to him, circumventing the embargo.

Just before the invasion, I asked the father of another terminally ill child, Mohammed, (10) what he would like to ask of George W. Bush and Tony Blair. He responded: "Please ask them, do they want all out children as child sacrifices?"

"Liberating" Iraq has resulted in an estimated five million orphans, one million widows, nearly five million displaced, internally and externally and an infrastructure, social distortion, medical tragedy which makes the embargo years seem mild. Between the embargo and the invasion - 1990 - 2011, higher estimates are three million dead, the unborn, new born and under fives, still paying the highest price. A "price worth it."

Happy Anniversary, Madam Albright.

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