

Public Health Crisis in Iraq: 13 years of sanctions and bombings, an illegal invasion and 5 years of death and destruction

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An Open Letter to the Minister of State for International Development : Regarding Public Health in Iraq.

The Rt. Hon. Douglas Alexander, M.P.,
Minister of State for International Development,
International Development Committee,
House of Commons..
Dear Mr Alexander,

Re: Public Health Iraq.

As one who has spent considerable time in Iraq over the years, has been Senior Researcher for two Award winning documentaries, on the state of the health and health infrastructure, before and after the embargo, has written and broadcast widely on Iraq and am co-author of an educational book on Baghdad, I write in some concern.

I was astonished to learn from your website, that at the Oral Evidence in the House of Commons, on the 22nd of January, 2008, in to the now shameful health system in Iraq (it's upkeep entirely the responsibility of the occupying forces under international law) you stated (after Question 15) 'There were literally decades of under investment and mismanagement within the health system ..' (under Saddam Hussein.)

With respect, this shows either a breathtaking ignorance, or a stunning economy with the truth.

The United Nations State of the Nations Report of 1989, recorded Iraq as having over ninety percent access to 'free high quality health care' (based on the British National Health Service, incidentally) and to clean water and an educational system so exemplary (free from kindergarten through university) that two years running, Iraq was awarded a special U.N., prize for its excellence. Hence the high qualifications of the country's professionals. The medical profession was one aspired to especially, by students. On qualification, many were paid for, by the Iraqi government, to also undertake post-graduate studies in the West, thus benefiting from expertise in both Iraqi and Western practices. Many of the students came to Britain, who benefited greatly financially from the Iraqi government's policy.

Thirteen years of the most draconian embargo ever imposed by the United Nations (driven by the US and UK) after the 1991 bombing, led to disaster in a country which had (on the

advice, ironically,, of the United Nations Food and Agricultural Organization) imported – broadly – seventy percent of everything. The forty two day carpet bombing defied the 1977 Additional Protocols to the Geneva Convention, which states: It is prohibited to ‘ attack destroy or render useless objects indispensable to the survival of the civilian population... including : foodstuffs, agricultural areas for the production of foodstuffs, crops, livestock, drinking water installations ... irrigation works.’ All the former were about seventy percent destroyed. Water and irrigation facilities, were totally destroyed, at the behest of US Central Command.

With denial of trade and imports, further deterioration occurred, despite the remarkable ingenuity of the Iraqi people and indeed the Ministries. However malnutrition rose – especially amongst the under fives and new born. Water born diseases soared, cholera and typhoid, virtually, eradicated returned and infant mortality became a searing wound on the soul of the nation. The pharmaceutical factories, which produced basics, including antibiotics, were also bombed, as were the factories which produced medical syringes.

Numerous hospitals and clinics across the country had been destroyed or damaged. Yet inspite lack of imported materials (and the bombing of the cement factory) they were somehow rebuilt and repaired, remarkably, in the circumstances. Of course over the eleven years of illegal, un-U.N., sactioned bombing, by the United States and United Kingdom, many facilities were again damaged or destroyed.

In 1998 every window in a ten story hospital in the center of Baghdad was blown out, by a bombing in a residential area. Patients were killed directly, shredded by glass shards turned missiles, or died of heart attacks and the hospital again badly damaged. Since the glass factory had been bombed in 1991, this was another major disaster. UNICEF stepped in and replaced probably a thousand plus windows, since one of the country’s major maternity units was situated there. The same year, at the country’s major pediatric oncology hospital, the nurses home was flattened and the hospital again badly damaged, in this war against the new born, the unborn and the under fives – in defiance of another swathe of international law.

Before these criminal acts, which took place from 1991 onwards : ‘.. very significant advances in the provision of health care and major construction projects, gave the country a first class range of medical facilities, in both large towns and through a series of clinics in rural areas’ (resulting in) infant mortality declining to about forty, per thousand live births.’ However: ‘Following five years of the economic embargo the infant mortality rate reached 97.2 per thousand live births’, by 1995.

There was, further ‘.. a two fold increase in infant mortality and a five fold increase in under five mortality and with an increasing prevalence of malnutrition, a two fold increase in stunting and a four fold increase in wasting, between August 1991 and August 1995. Mortality for the under fives had tripled.’

This in spite of a monthly free ration system, which the U.N., described as the most efficient they had monitored. But with the destruction of livestock, chicken farms and agriculture, imports not allowed and inflation stratospheric, essential proteins were missing. Year after year the United Nations Sanctions Committee (and I stress U.S., and U.K., driven) even vetoed protein biscuits, which Iraq had requested to add to the provisions.

I quote these facts, from the extensive United Nations Food and Agricultural Organization Report of 1995, the Result of a Mission led by Dr Peter Pellett, Professor of Nutrition at the University of Massachusetts, since it indicates especially graphically, the state of the formerly excellent health service and the plight of the most vulnerable, just five years in to the embargo. The 'oil for food' programme, when it finally came in to train, largely fiddled with what Iraq could and could not have, as Iraqis died. Hospital equipment, X-ray machines, dialysis machines, scanners, medications, instruments, theatre essentials, drips are needed instantly, not in six months, or a year later as day by day, patients died for the wait.

To illustrate the the iniquity, an acquaintance, in desperation, sent a supply if insulin, in a jiffy bag, to his diabetic brother in Baghdad, as none was available. It was returned by the Post Office as needing an export licence. His brother died before the license arrived. I myself was threatened by DFID with prosecution, for taking a year's supply of cancer treatment to a surgeon with cancer, who had worked here at the Hammersmith Hospital, a specialist in pediatric orthopedics, who had enabled numerous British children walk again, able to use their arms, straightened small bodies. Cancer treatments too, were vetoed by the United Nations Sanctions Committee.

From elevators, to central oxygen, to incubators, all gradually collapsed - with the Sanctions Committee denying parts or replacements. And as the years went on, the situation deteriorated from the impossible to the apocalyptic. Then based on a pack of lies, Iraq was bombed and invaded in 2003 and the hospitals and health service have near-collapsed entirely - along with everything else - so catastrophically, under the United States and Britain's watch and responsibility, that an oft repeated Iraqi refrain, is to refer to the 'golden days' of the embargo. The 2003 attack was, of course, Nuremberg's 'supreme international crime' which as a lawyer, you will of course, be aware.

Further, it took the embargo thirteen years for an estimated million and a quarter souls, to die of 'embargo-related causes.' (United Nations phrase.) It has taken just five years for America and Britain's 'liberation', to kill almost the same amount - according to the respected, ORB and John Hopkins, Bloomberg studies. Deaths - overtly through bombing, killings by troops their militias and other violence - and covertly, through the destruction of and failure to restore, Iraq's health care system. If Darfur's plight is 'genocide', what is Iraq's?

I apologize for the length of this letter, but felt that as you are in a position of potentially vital importance, relevant to hopefully, a rapid response to this shocking situation, if you are genuinely unaware of the background, there is a missile sized hole in your portfolio!

Iraq's health care system is not ' .. the result of decades of under investment and mismanagement', but of thirteen years of draconian sanctions and bombings, an illegal invasion and five years of further destruction and decimation. Given Britain's pivotal role in the all, the country has a duty to right an appalling wrong. With a change of Prime Minister, an electorate which has never been more cynical, which was promised a change of direction., Iraq will for ever be Labour's nemesis. Such a policy of reparation on Iraq's health care, might just win back a few British hearts and minds.

Yours sincerely,

Felicity Arbuthnot

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