

US-NATO Wars: “Collateral Repair” - Turning Despair to Hope....

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“Where did we leave our life behind?” I asked the butterfly circling round the light, and it burnt up in its tears.’ (Mahmoud Darwish, 1941-2008.)

As the US., and UK., rope in NATO and a few straggling cronies to bring freedom and democracy to Libya with Cruise missiles, and free the oil, water and gold bullion rich country of a “tyrant” - in the latest barrage of terror tactics, launched on 19th March, the anniversary of the invasion of Iraq, do they have a thought for the “collateral damage”, the scale, the horror imposed in 2003, and ongoing?

April 9th ., marks the eighth anniversary of the shameful specter of Burmese born Cpl., Edward Chin (23) covering the face of the statue of Iraq’s President in Firdos Square, with a US., flag; the statue being toppled. It was certainly symbolic - a symbol for the onset of the destruction of society, history, culture and lives decimated under the Stars and Stripes - continuing unremittingly. (Chin later said he had second thoughts about what message the use of the flag might send to the Iraqi people, that it might suggest US., occupation.) “At that moment, I was just doing what I was told to by my Commanding Officer”, he said.

Part of the tragedy which that moment marked, is the also the “collateral damage” of the nearly five million Iraqis displaced since. Fleeing an ethnic violence, engendered (some say orchestrated) by the invasion, amongst peoples who had lived together for centuries. For Iraq’s “huddled masses”, bombed, bewildered, despairing, dispossessed, just seventeen million US\$’s were allotted - compared to two hundred Billion\$’s for military purposes.

The majority have fled to neighboring Jordan and Syria. Syria has population of under twenty three million. Jordan’s population is under six million, of whom UNHCR estimate that between 750,000 and a million are Iraqis displaced since 2003. The number may well be an underestimate. Many have fled with what savings they have, from a country where some estimate unemployment since the invasion as high as seventy percent. They have fled kidnapping threats, bombings, militia, sectarian death threats, envelopes with bullets in put through the door with their name on - the bodies of those they love dumped, horribly mutilated outside their homes.

For those without \$US or other hard currency, the Iraqi Dinar at the time of writing 1,183 Iraq Dinar buys one Jordanian Dinar. An Iraq Dinar barely buys a few postage stamps in Jordan.

Frequently they arrive with just that which they can carry. Jordan’s economy and

employment has suffered from the influx, desperate Iraqis will work in the black economy, for lower wages. The government offers residency to Iraqis who can pay at least \$150,000. Few can. Others are “temporary guests”, with no legal status or work permission. When the permits expire, most then decide to stay illegally rather than return to the terror they fled.

Over-stayers (of any nationality) in Jordan are expected to make payments to the Jordanian government for every day over the allowed period. Most unable to do so, they remain in legal, residential and financial limbo, also outside the health care system, many suffering from injuries and serious medical conditions. Their children cannot go to school and for those on any firmer legal ground, they cannot anyway pay the entrance fees, uniforms, books.

Sasha Crow, from Oregon, went to Iraq with hundreds of others, from numerous countries, as a Human Shield, in 2003, a final desperate effort to prevent the bombing and invasion, which, short of a miracle, was clearly inevitable. She has, in a sense, been trying, against all odds, to be a human shield for Iraqis ever since.

In response to the totality of the “collateral damage” at every level, Crow, with fellow Oregonian, Mary Madsen, set up the “Collateral Repair Project” (CRP) now based in Jordan’s capitol, Amman. “Crisis is the everyday reality for nearly one million Iraqi refugees in Jordan. Without prospects of returning to their country, professions, homes and extended families, they languish in poverty and a growing sense of hopelessness for their future and that of their children. For them, the war is not over and thoughts of returning home are untenable. The threats to their lives remain a terrifying fact and hope slowly dissolves into despair and clinical depression. The sense of having been forgotten by the rest of the world is common throughout the refugee population”, she says.

This small hands on, grass roots project responds instantly to a call for help, no bureaucracy, form filling, queuing, Crow and the “skeletal staff”, she has now gathered, some Iraqi refugees themselves, simply respond by knocking at a door, listening to the problems and attempting to meet basic needs. Frequently they are shatteringly basic.

Recently, they : “received a desperate call” from a family. Their story is not unusual. Unable to work, money exhausted, they were four months behind with the rent. The water and electricity had been cut off due to non payment. The father of the three young children (7, 4 and 3) had been kidnapped by the militia, and tortured for twenty two days. The day he escaped, they fled.

They cannot return to Iraq for fear he will be kidnapped again and he cannot even work: “hauling things on the streets in the busy downtown area.” UNHCR have decided they are not eligible for resettlement abroad, thus, their asylum seeker registration form, and the protection it guarantees in the right to remain, has been removed. Without that paper, if he becomes visible, is asked for it and found without, they can be expelled from the country.

They: “live in a two room hovel, cold, bleak, the only furniture a single mattress leaning against the wall. There are no bathing facilities, the bathroom is a floor toilet, encrusted with mold. The kitchen is cockroach infested – and there was no food at all.” The wife is pregnant, near full term, has not been able to afford to see a doctor. If she goes to hospital for the birth, it will cost \$600. They have been able to plan no baby clothes, blankets, even small carrier for the baby to sleep in. The youngest child has anaemia – and they can no longer afford the iron tablets.

Sasha and Mary Shepherd, who joined her recently at the project, had brought small gifts of candy, paints and crayons for the children."They immediately ate the candy – then they ate the crayons and paint as well. We both had to look down to avoid them seeing the tears in our eyes." With the economic downturn, the Emergency Assistance budget is empty, but the family were given food, as a start, from the two's very minimal salaries.

The needs they try to meet are enormous, as is the mental toll they take.

One family arrived with just \$7 to hopefully start a new life. CRP provided rent and basic necessities for two months. Another, Zeinab, a widow, was left to bring up six children, after her husband was killed in Baghdad, passing an area targeted by US., forces.

Another family, followers of the Sabeian faith, were repeatedly the victims of militia attacks for being non-Muslim (unheard of before the invasion.) The husband was violently beaten, then their house was burned down. They moved, but there was no escape. The bodies of tortured, murdered victims were dumped in their yard. They fled, leaving everything. "In Baghdad we were wealthy, now we have nothing", she said, as the tears flowed.

Hussein, was working in maintenance for Baghdad City. Three masked men pulled up and opened fire on him: "Probably because he was a minority sect in his neighbourhood." They left him for dead, with nine bullets in his body, one exiting through his left eye, destroying it. He is now paraplegic. When he was recovered enough, he and his family too left for Jordan. "What resources did they have?" The only thing they had left of value was his electric wheelchair – which he sold for \$400.

They paid two months rent on a "tiny sub-standard apartment." Hussein now spends his days in bed, looked after by his frail mother, who had managed to pile some blankets behind him and a small end table, so he can at least sit up. CRP., is trying to buy him a new wheelchair, and rehouse them in an apartment which is wheelchair accessible, with enough space for him also to be able to move around in his chair within. He needs a hospital bed – and they need rent and food money.

Semira and her father, were set on fire by militia, after beating them badly. She survived, he father did not. "She receives approximately \$100 financial assistance – her rent is \$70." The apartment had: "huge areas of wall missing, making it impossible to heat – but she had no heater." CRP hired their Iraqi handy man to repair the wall, reinforce the badly leaking roof – and provided a heater.

"Hajjia now lives Amman, in a room meant for washing the bodies of the dead which has no running water and a hole in the floor for a toilet that overflows with sewage. She has not been able to bathe or wash her hair for several months. She has no heat source or way to cook. She sleeps with one thin blanket on a lumpy mat that she has pulled out of the garbage."

Then there are the cancer and thalassemia cases, soaring in Iraq since 1991 – related to the use of chemically toxic and radioactive Depleted Uranium, and other weapons. Treatment – the difference between life and death – costs around \$1,300 a month. Bone marrow transplants, sometimes the only life guaranteeing treatment, is a staggering \$200,000+.

Near every Iraqi has a tragedy to share and a burden to bear. But says Crow, their sardonic humour, fortitude, dignity and generosity of spirit is unfailing. And they remain in Jordan

praying for normality restored, that a country will take them – any country; people for whom, before the invasion – in spite of thirteen years of bombings, the grinding embargo, the regime – the idea of leaving their country, their town, city or village, would have been inconceivable.

Ironically, Iraqis resettled in the United States, the cause of their misery, must sign a contract before they are given their ticket, agreeing to repay the US., government the cost – around \$1,500. Lose all, then repay the architect of you misery is a whole new ball game. It is usual for the perpetrator of a crime to pay, not vice versa.

However, in spite of the seemingly insurmountable needs. Sasha Crow, Ghazwan, her “right hand”, Mary Shepherd and the group are unfailing optimistic and inventive. There are Saturday, summer art projects, for Iraqi children (3-1 and 8-14) and music lessons with drums, harmonicas and rattles. At the summer’s end, there is an exhibition of the childrens’ work, with games and face painting. Each child receives a certificate – and a supply of art materials. A recent addition is art classes for those up to 24, otherwise isolated at home, a chance to socialize. English lessons are offered by volunteers, in several levels of competency, including pre-school.

Iraqis in this limbo do not have funds to purchase cameras, thus have no record of their children’s growing years, achievement, birthdays. CRP now has “Studio Days” for free family portraits. Lack of photographs have been a small, in the scale of things, yet huge, tragedy. And if a child dies – and the health problems resultant from the war’s poisonous pollution are huge – the family seldom has even one photograph of their fledgling lost.

An Iraqi passion among men is dominos. Walk down almost any side street in Iraq, on a balmy evening, where there are cafes, and on every table will be a domino board, and the rattle and clack of the pieces, slapped down or slid, as tiny glasses of sweet tea are drunk and the najila smoked. CRP now have a weekly domino night, so popular that they are trying to move to a larger annex. Another small escape in to normality.

Another project was initiated by an Iraqi mother, to bring mothers and their children together for activities for the children and creating the chances of new friendships for the mothers. Childrens parties for special occasions, as Valentine’s day, are well established.

A website is being constructed for an innovative project of the Warshat al-Amal (Hope Workshop.) Beautiful, functional, green products are made entirely from discarded plastic bags: purses, tote bags, bath and kitchen mats are amongst the items produced.

A small lending library is slowly building up, books are a now luxury for those from the country where writing is believed to have been invented. On the 2011 wish list, is a large tv and DVD player, so there can be regular “movie nights.” A dream is a computer learning centre, with a minimum of ten computers. With Iraq’s electricity collapse since the invasion, many Iraqis do not have computer experience, so cheap easy contact with now scattered family and friends and the ability for employment needs are lost to them.

CRP also helps families set up micro home businesses, providing a sewing machine for a seamstress or tailor, wherewithal for hairdressing, bread making, varying craft work and more., a chance of a way out of : “a silent, fearful existence.” Poverty endangers dignity at every level. Mothers cannot afford the price of disposable diapers. CRP has a project to make toweling ones and employ Iraqi women to sew them.

However, as the global cash crisis bites, donations are dropping and Collateral Repair's unique outreach is in danger of becoming collateral damage. Compared to the West, Jordan is remarkably inexpensive, the chairs needed for the expanded dominos room, cost just \$6.50 each; the five large tables needed only \$26 a piece. Warm winter coats for children are \$10 each, the sweets, toys and crayons or paints they take to children of families they visit little more than \$1. A entire bolt of toweling for diapers is just \$30. Rents, food, medical aid, heaters, stoves, refrigerators, bedding and the endless unexpected all also has to be financed.

On this day, eight years on from the beginning of Iraq's Year Zero and the anniversary of the funeral of Martin Luther King, forty three years ago, please consider donating a little or a lot, from the \$1 for childrens' toys, to the price of a chair, a coat, books or more. Not a cent or a penny will be wasted and it can make the difference between despair and hope.

A wealth of detail:

<http://www.collateralrepairproject.blogspot.com>

See also:

<http://kyotojournal.org/10,000things/215.html>

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