

How Many Must Die?

An estimated 1 million people, more than half of them children, have died as a result of the sanctions against Iraq.

BY GEORGE CAPACCIO

It was a winter's day, and I stood in an unheated room in a hospital in the ancient city of Mosul, Iraq. I was surrounded by children afflicted with a blood disease known as septicemia. I turned to our guide, a member of the Iraqi Red Crescent Society, and asked him about the prognosis for the children. Normally a calm, restrained man, he turned toward me with a look I had not seen on his face before.

"Mr. George," he said, "sometimes you know because of the shortage of medicines, they are all of them going to be dead."

Then he turned away. At that moment, one of the doctors, a young woman, began to cry. Her colleague confided in English to me: "We have the skills, the training and all we can do is provide supportive care. Please understand, sometimes it is more than we can bear."

I offered a teddy bear to a little boy nearby. His mother was standing between him and his brother. Both were dying from septicemia. Two other children from the same family had already died from this disease. The woman took the toy from her son's hands and returned it to me.

"We don't want toys," she said in anger. "We want medicine."

As a delegate with various humanitarian organizations, I visited Iraq several times in 1998 and 1999. Sanctions were first imposed by the United Nations, under the leadership of the United States, in August 1990 following Iraq's invasion of Kuwait. They will continue until Iraq concedes to a list of conditions, including the elimination of its weapons of mass destruction and ongoing UN monitoring of its weapons capacity.

While nominally targeted at the government of Saddam Hussein, the sanctions have imposed conditions of life calculated to maximize suffering for the majority of Iraq's citizens. In this regard, sanctions have been stunningly successful.

UNNECESSARY DEATHS

According to the UN, more than 1 million people — including more than 500,000 children below the age of five — have died in Iraq as a result of scarcity of food and medicine. Furthermore, 3 percent of Iraqi children under five are chronically malnourished. Almost one-quarter are considered underweight, twice as high as the levels in neighboring Jordan or Turkey, according to a 1997 UNICEF report.

Every day an estimated 250 people die as a result of health problems related to the sanctions. Children under age five, who account for almost half of such deaths, are dying mainly due to diarrhea, pneumonia, and malnutrition.

Prior to sanctions, health care in Iraq was free and first-rate. Now the public hospitals lack even adequate sanitation and are forced to charge patients for most services. Furthermore, the sanctions include an "intellectual boycott," which cuts Iraqis off from international medical and scientific advances.

The economy, meanwhile, is in shambles, and the GDP per capita has plummeted. Public rations have been instituted, but food is in short supply and the rations do not provide sufficient minerals, vitamins, or nutrients.

The devastation of the sanctions follows massive destruction as a result of the 1991 Gulf War, in which the U.S. and its allies carried out more than 100,000 bombing missions against Iraq in a six-week period. An estimated 88,000 tons of bombs were dropped — equivalent to seven Hiroshima-type atomic bombs. Because of the bombing and the sanctions, water and sewage treatment plants operate at a critically reduced capacity. Water-borne diseases such as gastroenteritis, cholera, typhus, and typhoid fever are common.

CANCERS INCREASE

On several of my visits to Iraq, I went to the Saddam Teaching Center in Baghdad.

In Iraq, prior to 1990, the remission rate for leukemia and other forms of cancer was about 70 percent, comparable to what it is the United States. Now, according to Dr. Muhammed Hillal, chief of pediatrics, it is between 6 percent and 7 percent. Dr. Hillal maintains that there has been a sixfold increase in childhood cancer since the imposition of sanctions. He attributes the increase to the toxins from the weapons of coalition forces during the Gulf War, along with all the other toxins released into the environment as a result of the war.

One child in the hospital's intensive care unit had been accidentally poisoned with insecticide. There was no hope for recovery. When his mother understood the reason for my visit, she became disturbed. "Why is the American President killing the Iraqi people?" she asked. "He doesn't hurt our government, only the little children." ■

A longer version of this article originally appeared in Rethinking Schools, Volume 13, No. 3, Spring 1999. The full text is available at www.rethinkingschools.org/Archives/13_03/iraq.htm. George Capaccio is a writer from Arlington, MA. He has been traveling to Iraq since 1997.

Teaching Ideas

On the newsmagazine, *60 Minutes*, former Sec. of State Madeleine Albright acknowledged the enormous suffering and deaths of children in Iraq but said it was "worth it." Find out why Albright and other U.S. government officials believe this.

Choose one of the health care workers George Capaccio encounters in Iraq and write a conversation between this individual and Albright.

Watch the video, *One Million Postcards*, about two sisters who decide to do something about the suffering in Iraq. They launch a campaign to ask people to design postcards and send them to the U.S. government about the situation in Iraq. After watching the video, students might design postcards of their own. *One Million Postcards* and an accompanying teaching guide are available from the American Friends Service Committee: www.afsc.org/iraqhome.htm; or 215-241-7170.