

Silence Is Betrayal

By Conn Hallinan

Dan Handelman is haunted by two images of Iraq that most Americans never see on television.

One is a frail two-year-old slowly dying of dehydration in a Basra hospital while his mother sits next to him, helpless to stop the ravages of diarrhea and infection. He is, according to the World Health Agency, one of the 5,000 Iraqi children who die of water-borne diseases and malnutrition each month.

The other is a group of children begging in the streets. "There were no beggars in Baghdad before the Gulf War, and now many of them have to beg rather than be in school," he says. Indeed, Iraq used to have the highest literacy rate in the Arab world—95%—but according to UNICEF, 30% of its children no longer attend school.

Handleman, a member of Friends of Voices in the Wilderness, is from Portland, Oregon, and along with a handful of other Americans, has traveled to Iraq to witness first hand the ravages of war and sanctions—and to record what is being done in our name.

The young boy in Basra is dying because the U.S. systematically targeted water purification plants and electrical generators in the 1991 Gulf War. We certainly didn't bomb those targets by accident. According to Col. John Warden, the deputy director of strategy, doctrine, and plans for the U.S. Air Force, the purpose of the attacks was "to accelerate the effects of [economic] sanctions" and increase "long-term leverage."

The bombing knocked out almost 97% of the country's electrical capacity, a disaster in a highly mechanized and electricity dependent society like Iraq. In the first eight months following the war, 47,000 children died of diseases like cholera, typhoid, and gastroenteritis. More than

a half million have followed them in the past decade, and infant mortality has tripled.

Much of the responsibility for this rests on the shoulders of the Clinton administration, which knew what was happening to Iraq's children. In 1996, Leslie Stahl of CBS asked Secretary of State Madeleine Albright: "We have heard that half a million children have died. I mean, that's more than died in Hiroshima. And, you know, is the price worth it?" Albright replied: "I think this is a very hard choice, but price, we think the price is worth it."

Such bombing is in direct violation of the Geneva Conventions, which explicitly states that "It is prohibited to attack, destroy, remove, or render useless objects indispensable to the survival of the civilian population, such as foodstuffs, crops, livestock, drinking water installations and supplies, and irrigation works."

There is a cruelty in all this that most Americans would recoil from. "The sanctions let water pumps in," says Handleman (which are essential for combating water-borne diseases), "but not the ball bearings that they need to function." He adds the sanctions let in syringes, "but not needles. You can get IV (intravenous) bags for combating dehydration, but not the needles that allow you to put the fluids into a child."

The so-called "Food for Oil" program has been a flat-out failure, and not, according to the UN, because of the Hussein government. "The magnitude of the humanitarian needs is such," states a 1999 UN report, "that they cannot be met within the parameters set forth in Resolution 986," (the Security Council resolution that set up Food for Oil).

Malnutrition is spreading, in large part according to the UN, because of the "massive deterioration of the basic infrastructure, particularly in

the water supply and disposal system.” Besides the deliberate destruction of the civilian infrastructure, the backwash of war also continues to take a steady toll on Iraqi civilians. Southern Iraq was saturated with almost a million rounds of Depleted Uranium Ammunition, which has raised radioactive levels 150 to 200 times over background levels.

Basra Hospital Director Akram Abed Hassan says, “Our cancer incidence has increased 10 times during the past few years. Before, we had very few patients under 30, now we’re operating on 10-year-old girls with breast cancer.” Leukemia and kidney failure rates have also risen sharply.

The Bush administration says we are after Saddam Hussein, but for the

past 10 years, as Handelman points out, the victims have been “the 23 million people of Iraq.” A new war, he argues, will immeasurably worsen an already terrible situation.

Iraq lost several thousand civilians in Gulf War I, and the Pentagon Projects Gulf War II will kill another 10,000, not counting those who will die from the consequences of bombing. Of course, in a sense, we are already at war with Iraq. The U.S. and Britain have dropped more bombs on Iraq since 1999 than were dropped on Serbia in the Kosovo War, and have sharply stepped up the air campaign over the past two weeks.

That bombing has taken a steady toll on civilians, as it has in Afghanistan. For all the hype about “smart bombs”

and “surgical strikes,” more than 3,000 Afghan civilians have died from U.S. bombs, and it is scary to contemplate what an aerial assault on Baghdad, a city of five million, will do.

All of this will be carried out in our name unless Americans do something to stop it. “A time has come when silence is betrayal,” Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. said about Vietnam, another war that targeted civilians, “that time is now.”

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