MERIA

SANCTIONS ON IRAQ: A VALID ANTI-AMERICAN GRIEVANCE?

By Michael Rubin*

In the wake of the September 11 terrorist attacks, many academics and policymakers cite America's support for United Nations sanctions on Iraq, and the oft-reported figure of one million resulting deaths, as a legitimate grievance against Washington's foreign policy. However, the facts upon which these critics make their case do not hold up under close scrutiny. Not only does the one million dead figure and other statistics originate with Iraqi government (and not UN research as is so often cited), but portions of Iraq are actually doing better under sanctions than before their implementation. One UN study even reported nine years into sanctions that half the Iraqi population was overweight. Comparing the impact of sanctions between opposition-controlled Iraqi provinces and the portions of the country ruled by Saddam Hussein indicates that, while the deleterious impact of sanctions upon the Iraqi population has been grossly exaggerated, what problems do occur are a result of Baghdad's political leadership.

In his taped broadcast following the beginning of U.S. military action against Afghanistan in October 2001, Usama Bin Laden blamed the United States for the suffering of the Iraqi people. The claim that international sanctions have led to the death of one million Iraqis is often accepted at face value by academics, activists, UN officials, and even some policymakers. Tracing such claims to their origin, however, casts doubt not only on the numbers but also regarding the often-assumed linkage between sanctions and suffering in Iraq.

On October 7, as the U.S. military campaign against in Afghanistan began, the Qatar-based television station al-Jazeera broadcast a tape from Usama Bin Laden. In an effort to push populist buttons in the Middle East, Bin Laden blamed America for suffering in Iraq, declaring, "There are civilians, innocent children being killed every day in Iraq without any guilt, and we never hear anybody."(1)

Not only does Bin Laden's claim have an audience in the Islamic world for those believing that the United States seeks to undermine the Muslim nations, but also among many U.S. academics, journalists, and policymakers who readily accept claims that the U.S. is responsible for the deaths of more than a million Iraqis. For example, just two days after Bin Laden's video aired, Congressman Jim McDermott (D-WA) blamed sanctions for suffering in Iraq. The same day, the online political news magazine Slate declared (based on the statement of UNICEF director Carol Bellamy) in an article about the alleged death of one million children in Iraq that "UNICEF's data on Iraqi child mortality rates haven't been disputed."(2) Such claims have found a receptive audience on college campuses. For example, in April 1999, the Yale College government voted on behalf of the entire Yale University student body to condemn sanctions on Iraq. (3)

The claim that sanctions have caused upwards of one million deaths in Iraq has been so often repeated, it is now accepted as unquestioned truth. Perennial opponents of U.S. policy Noam Chomsky and Edward Said, among others, declare, "The sanctions [on Iraq]

are weapons of mass destruction."(4) The American Friends Service Committee has been very vocal in its opposition to U.S. sanctions policy, arguing that, "During the past ten years, sanctions have led to an almost complete breakdown in economic, medical, social, and educational structures."(5) When resigning from his UN post, Denis Halliday, the former United Nations Humanitarian Coordinator in Iraq, declared, "We are in the process of destroying an entire society."(6)

Even some practitioners of U.S. foreign policy have questioned sanctions. Richard Haass, later appointed to head the State Department Policy Planning Staff, and Meghan O'Sullivan wrote in their comprehensive critique of sanctions, "Sanctions can be costly for innocent bystanders, particularly the poorest in the target country and American businesses and commercial interests. In addition, sanctions often evoke unintended consequences, such as the strengthening of obnoxious regimes."(7)

But where does the claim of mass death or even genocide in Iraq originate?

In short, with the Iraqi government itself. Saddam Hussein's government has since the mid-1990s claimed that United Nations sanctions had resulted in more than a million deaths. Surprisingly, Baghdad also prevented humanitarian organizations to conduct their own fieldwork to verify the claims. Unable to conduct their own large-scale surveying, some humanitarian organizations adopted Iraqi government figures, thus amplifying the claim. In 1995, for example, UNICEF estimated that more than 1.2 million Iraqis had died as a result of sanctions, while the US-based International Action Coalition claimed that by 1997, the economic embargo upon Iraq had killed 1.4 million people.(8)

Baghdad's claims were spacious, though. Iraq expert Amatzia Baram compared the country's population growth rates over the last three censuses and found there to be almost no difference between in the rate of Iraq's population growth between 1977 and 1987 (35.8 percent), and between 1987 and 1997 (35.1 percent).(9)

So how did the claim of more than a million sanctions-related deaths in Iraq persist? In 1999, UNICEF released a glossy, detailed report that again concluded that sanctions had contributed to the deaths of one million Iraqis. UNICEF did not complete the report independently however, but rather co-authored it with the Iraqi government's health ministry (according to the report's own front cover). It is this report that is most often cited by activists and journalists, although seldom do they refer to it as a joint publication of Saddam's government. Both current and former UN personnel admit this report to be problematic especially because its statistics come from the Iraqi government, which blocks independent information gathering.(10) Former UN officials related that many statistics are of questionable veracity.(11) One troubling sign of lack of objectivity is a map on the first page of the first chapter. While purporting to show the region, the map omits Kuwait, and makes it appear that the country is actually part of Iraq.(12) The inclusion of the map raises issue of what compromises UNICEF made to complete the study.

Many academics as well as those in the activist and conflict resolution communities nevertheless accept the UNICEF statistics at face value. However, a careful examination shows that the reported results make no sense. According to data presented in the report, the mortality rate for children under five years old and the infant mortality rate increased after the adoption of the oil-for-food program almost doubled caloric intake. For example, in 1995, the infant mortality rate allegedly was 98 deaths per thousand while, in 1998, it was 103 deaths per thousand. Likewise, the under five years old mortality rate reportedly rose to 125 deaths per thousand in 1998, from 117 in 1995.(13) Ironically, the suspicious implication here is that the reduction of sanctions increases suffering in Iraq.

Further, according to the UNICEF study, child mortality rose in the portion of Iraq

controlled by Saddam Hussein from 56 per thousand before sanctions to 131 per thousand in 1999, a magnitude rise for which there is no evidence. Curiously, UNICEF (or perhaps the Iraqi government) did not provide a breakdown of the figures by quarters of Baghdad, where one-third of the Iraqi population lives. Accordingly, no comparison among various constituencies in the city is possible, to see if food is getting, for example, to Arab Sunnis, but not to Arab Shi'i or Kurds.(14)

However, a comparison can be made within the report between those areas under Saddam's control and those areas administered by the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK). In Iraqi Kurdistan, the figures dropped from 80 per thousand before sanctions, to 72 per thousand. The far higher original figures for the north show the traditional neglect of that area by the Baghdad government.

At the same time, though, northern Iraq also faced both the same international sanctions as did Baghdad, additional sanctions imposed by the Saddam Hussein government, and had poorer medical facilities than the part of the country controlled by the Baghdad regime. The difference between falling mortality rates in the north and claims that these rates were rising elsewhere may be due to the fact that outsiders can measure statistics in the north. Thus, the numbers for Iraqi Kurdistan, showing a decline in child mortality, are more accurate than those for the part of the country ruled by the central government. The claim that child mortality increased by almost 250 percent is a fiction.

The increase in mortality in Iraqi government areas is also curious given the well-established food distribution system prior to the oil-for-food implementation in the center and south of the country, but not in the double-embargoed and civil war-torn northern governorates.(15) Aside from the fact that the Iraqi statistics are themselves questionable, even if they had some validity, why did the Kurdish autonomy area fare better than the rest of the Iraq? The other answer is that the Kurdish administration not only budgeted oil-for-food income to benefit the population, but also used available discretionary tax revenues for development and services, while Saddam Hussein's government consistently sought to undermine the oil-for-food program, while using its smuggling and tax revenues to support its military.

In short, most of the evidence for claims of severe suffering under sanctions comes from the Iraqi government itself, whose record for veracity is not good and which has an obvious interest in exaggerating the deprivations of sanctions in order to end them and to turn international public opinion against its enemies.

Further undercutting the 1999 UNICEF report is an often ignored and independently produced September 2000 Food and Agriculture Report, written in collaboration with the World Health Organization, which found half of the Iraqi adult population to be overweight and one of the leading causes of mortality to be hypertension and diabetes, not commonly diseases of the hungry.(16)

Dismissing the value of the UNICEF/Iraqi government-authored survey does not indicate that there is not suffering in Iraq—reports from some (predominantly Shi'i) cities in southern Iraq indicate the situation is bad—but nowhere near the extent suggested by anti-sanctions activists and academics. Problems with the UNICEF/Iraqi government report also highlight the difficulty of balancing compromise with access.

Structural impediments on the ability of the UN to operate in Iraq outside of Baghdad's control raises further questions about the Iraqi government's desire to hide the true situation so it can make false claims about the humanitarian cost of sanctions. Under the terms of the 1996 Memorandum of Understanding, the Iraqi government controls visa issuance for UN employees, giving it effective veto power over the hiring of consultants and specialists.(17) Since 1998, Iraq has banned British and American citizens from UN jobs declaring them spies. In September, Iraq expelled a number of Nigerian and Bosnian UN workers on similar, unsubstantiated charges.

At the same time, however, officials in the Kurdish autonomous area of northern Iraq have no control over such personnel, though they complain that the World Health Organization, World Food Program, and UNICEF hire nationals from countries like Egypt, Jordan, Yemen, and Sudan whose governments are increasingly sympathetic to the Iraqi government, and who are often selected based upon their home government connections(18) In a 2001 UNICEF report of its activities in Iraq over the past decade, one senior UNICEF employee spoke of having to "go through the report with a red pen" to remove the biased data and propaganda inserted by his predecessor, a Jordanian Palestinian.(19)

Whatever the case with anyone's individual bias, the 1996 Memorandum of Understanding governing relief work creates a dynamic that discourages UN workers in Iraq from straying from Baghdad's official line. Because UN workers must renew their Iraq visas every six months, Baghdad can encourage self-censorship by forcing anyone whose views it doesn't like to leave the country. One German UN worker commented that his colleagues from poorer countries like Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Somalia, were "scared to death" they might do something that might antagonize Baghdad and cause them to lose the best paying job they ever had.

Another problem is that local people make it difficult to achieve accurate survey results because of an understandable belief that exaggerating will result in more help for themselves.(20) One NGO working with disabled children, found three different families claiming the same mentally retarded child as a dependent, figuring each would get aid payments.

WHAT EXACTLY ARE THE SANCTIONS ON IRAQ?

International sanctions on Iraq have become a lightening rod for anti-American criticism, leading to calls for change even within the U.S. government (or, at least, within the State Department). Yet an examination of exactly what sanctions the UN imposed, and how they work contradicts many of the criticisms.

One fundamental problem is that it is easy to view sanctions as a blockade, an attempt to stop anything from getting in or out of Iraq. In fact, the sanctions have three important special features that make them into something quite different from a generalized blockade:

1. The sanctions are selective, designed to keep out weapons and not food or medicine.
2. The sanctions can be ended any time by a decision by the Iraqi government to cooperate. Such a choice would have let the regime stay in power and actually improved its political, diplomatic, and economic position—albeit at the cost of accepting reduced military power.
3. The sanctions took the form of directed spending. Far from keeping the Iraqi government from spending money on food, housing, medicine, health or education, the sanctions regime tried to force a reluctant Iraqi government to put a larger proportion of its income into such social services.

Hours after Iraq invaded Kuwait on August 2, 1990, the UN Security Council condemned the invasion.(21) Iraq refused to withdrawal, so the Security Council adopted Resolution 661, which imposed comprehensive sanctions prohibiting import or exports of goods with Iraq (export for food and medicine) or investment in that country.(22) This is an important point since claims that sanctions are inflicting great suffering on Iraqi civilians often seem predicated on a belief that they block food and medicine from reaching the people.

After an extended air campaign and a 100-hour ground war, the UN and Iraq agreed to a cease-fire in March 1991, outlined in Resolution 687, many terms of which Iraq continues to violate.(23) The Resolution obligated Iraq to respect the inviolability of Kuwait's borders (an obligation Iraq threatened in 1994, and which Saddam Hussein's son Uday dismissed in a prominent December 30,

2000 article in the official Babil newspaper).(24)

Resolution 687 also provides the basis for Iraqi payment of war damage compensation and for international inspections to locate and eliminate Iraq's weapons of mass destruction programs. The resolution noted that, under Saddam Hussein's government, Iraq was in contravention to many commitments, including the 1925 Protocol for the Prohibition of the Use in War of Asphyxiating, Poisonous, or Other Gases, and of Bacteriological Methods of Warfare; the 1989 Final Declaration of states party to the Geneva Convention in which Iraq obligated itself to the objective of eliminating chemical and biological weapons; the 1972 Convention on the Prohibition of the Development, Production, and Stockpiling of Bacteriological (Biological) and Toxin Weapons and their Destruction; and the 1968 Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty.(25)

The Security Council also considered Iraq's threats to use weapons of mass destruction. Accordingly, UNSCR 687 mandated that Iraq "shall unconditionally accept" the destruction under international supervision of all biological and chemical weapons, and ballistic missiles with a range greater than 150 kilometers. To verify this, the resolution authorized on-site UN inspections. This provided the basis for the UN Special Commission (UNSCOM). However, Iraq consistently refused to cooperate. Swedish Ambassador and UNSCOM chief Rolf Ekeus reported that Iraq did not unconditionally accept inspections. As UNSCOM began to investigate Iraq's methods of concealing its retained WMD capabilities, Iraq increased its resistance to inspections in direct contradiction to its commitments.(26)

Why have sanctions—and any consequent suffering for Iraq's people—lasted so long? The Iraqi government has deliberately rejected meeting its commitments to eliminate WMD, believing that international pressure will force an end to sanctions without its having to make any concessions. In order to force the UN to surrender, Baghdad has used five main strategies:

- To intimidate the UN by making threats and refusing to cooperate.
- To wear down its adversaries by stretching out the need to maintain sanctions over many years, when the issues could have been resolved in a much shorter time period.
- To fool the UN by a superficial pretense to cooperation at times and by supplying misinformation.
- To undermine the coalition by offering various countries—notably China, France, and Russia—lucrative oil, arms, and other contracts to be implemented when sanctions are removed.
- To gain support from international public opinion by depriving its own citizens of their material needs, exaggerate the suffering, and blame the problem on the United States. Portraying Iraq as a nation of hungry people and sick children became a cynical propaganda tool. Blaming foreigners for the regime's decisions and mismanagement could also increase domestic support for the government.

On one level, this strategy has met with a great deal of success. But at the same time this strategy has also failed to destroy sanctions (though they have been eroded). In short, Saddam Hussein has delayed Iraq's return to a better international, economic, and even military situation, but it has been his decision to do so.

The fact that the Iraqi government has once again victimized its own citizens is clear on a number of fronts. Consider two very telling examples. In both 1998 and 1999, Saddam Hussein repeatedly refused to order baby formula for his population even though he had the funds to do so and was urged to take such action by the UN.(27) In addition, while claiming to face dire food shortages, Iraq actually exported food to other countries.(28)

Perhaps the most important single case was that it was Saddam and not the United States or UN that delayed implementation of the oil-for-food program. Less than six months after the end of hostilities, the Security Council adopted resolutions to allow Iraq to sell its oil in order to provide revenue for the purchase of essential humanitarian supplies.(29) However, the Iraqi government refused to accept the resolution.(30)

The UN again sought to deliver food and humanitarian supplies to the people of Iraq. On April 14, 1995, the UN Security Council passed Resolution 986, the "oil-for-food" program.(31) Declaring the need for the "equitable distribution of humanitarian relief to all segments of the Iraqi population," the resolution created an escrow account for Iraqi oil proceeds. The UN in turn could use these proceeds to purchase supplies and monitor their distribution. Again, the Iraqi government refused to accept the program.(32)

International pressure mounted on Saddam's government to allow relief, though he succumbed only after lack of hard currency income caused the value of the Iraqi Dinar to plummet.(33). On May 20, 1996, the UN Secretariat and the Iraqi government signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) to implement the oil-for-food program, almost five years after the UN first offered such assistance.(34) However, in order to get Saddam to let it help the Iraqi people the UN compromise in accepting Iraq's demands, setting up a system that made it easier for Baghdad to smuggle in military-related items. It allowed the Iraqi government to contract directly with suppliers, and to be the sole body allowed to request supplies.

Moreover, in exchange, the Iraqi government was supposed to "provide to United Nations personnel the assistance required to facilitate the performance of their functions," including "unrestricted freedom of movement." It repeatedly violated this commitment. According to Benon Sevon, executive director of the Iraq Program at the UN, as of July 11, 2001, the Iraqi government had failed to grant visas to 280 UN officials involved with the humanitarian program visas to do their jobs in Iraq.(35) One reason for this lack of cooperation may be to conceal corruption. Supplies are taken and resold on the market by Iraqi officials. The government turns a blind eye to such practices which, by benefiting loyalists, actually strengthen the regime itself.

Once implemented, however, the oil-for-food program did provide a huge pool of funds for humanitarian programs. The program initially allowed the Iraqi government to sell up to $2 billion in oil every 180 days, the proceeds of which could be used to purchase food and medicine, as well as to repair vital infrastructure. In 1999, the UN eliminated the cap on oil sales.(36) From the beginning of the program through August 2001, Iraq sold more than $46 billion in oil, an amount greater than initially anticipated because of the rise in world oil prices.(37)

Thus, the UN tried to ensure that the Iraqi people would have adequate food and medicine. The Iraqi government had the funds to do so and had dictated the arrangements for making such purchases. Yet it still did not fulfill these responsibilities. Indeed, the UN and the coalition have been more concerned about the welfare of the Iraqi people than was the Iraqi government.

This statement is most clearly proven by comparing the priorities of the Iraqi government and the sanctioning authorities. Before the invasion of Kuwait and imposition of sanctions, the Iraqi government spent less than 25 percent of its income on humanitarian programs. However, under the sanctions regime, Iraq was ordered to allocate 72 percent of its oil income for humanitarian projects.(38) Another 25 percent is allocated to the compensation committee, while the UN applies 3 percent to administrative expenses. To cite only one example of what this oil-for-food funding has achieved, throughout all of Iraq it has supported almost $2 billion in housing contracts.(39) In short, Iraq's real objection is that while there is plenty of money for meeting

the needs of the Iraqi people, there are supposed to be no funds left over for obtaining weapons.

THE CONTRAST IN IRAQI KURDISTAN

While Baghdad manages program implementation in regions of its control, the UN implements the humanitarian programs in the Kurdish-controlled north, funded by 13 percent of the total oil-sale revenue, a figure proportional to the northern governorates' population.(40) The Kurds very much value the 13 percent allocation, fear that they will lose the humanitarian guarantees if sanctions are lifted. Barham Salih, prime minister of the PUK's half of the Kurdistan Regional Government, recently called the oil-for-food program "truly revolutionary" in that "never before in our history have we had a government obliged by international law to devote Iraq's oil revenues to the well being of the Iraqi people."(41)

Despite its faults, the 1999 UNICEF/Iraqi government report highlighted the possible discrepancy between the situation in Kurdish-controlled northern Iraq and the portions of Iraq under Saddam Hussein's rule. While the entire country remains under why is it that a large portion of the country run by an alternative administration is now healthier than before the imposition of sanctions? The very success of northern Iraq is all the more impressive given the region's desperate situation at the time sanctions were first imposed in 1990. After all, two years earlier, the Iraqi government had carried out its Anfal campaign, an ethnic cleansing operation in which 182,000 people died, and hundreds of thousands more were displaced.(42)

Even though neither the Kurds nor the Iraqi government have spent the full amount of money allocated to them, Iraqi Kurdistan thrives, while Baghdad complains that the same sanctions cause suffering. The fact that the health and welfare of the northern governorates has increased since the implementation of the oil-for-food program indicates that it is Saddam's governance, and not sanctions, which causes suffering in Iraq. Such a comparison creates a dilemma for the aid community, which must confront evidence that suffering in Iraq is not due to lack of access to food, money, or humanitarian supplies, but instead may be intentional on the part of the Iraqi government. This observation is shared not only by Kurds, but also by Arab Iraqis living under Saddam, whom I met in the northern safe-haven. (Perhaps because of this, the Iraqi government is now curtailing freedom of travel between its area of control and the safe-haven).(43)

Everywhere in the safe-haven, blue signs announcing UN oil-for food projects are omnipresent, even in the smallest villages. According to Nasreen Mustafa Sideek, minister of reconstruction and development in Iraqi Kurdistan:

> "Since the programs began, more than 20,000 families throughout Iraqi Kurdistan have been provided with accommodation. Hundreds of schools with thousands of classrooms have been constructed and many more are being planned. Hundreds of kilometers of village access roads have been completed along with water systems, health centers, irrigation channels, veterinary centers, and other works."(44)

The sheer scale of reconstruction is impressive. In the Dahuk governorate, Saddam Hussein had destroyed 809 villages of an original 1,123. Since 1991, the Kurdish administration, relying heavily on oil-for-food income, rebuilt 470. In the Irbil governorate, the Iraqi government razed 1,205 of an original 1,497 villages. Already, the Kurdish government has been able rebuild 800. In the Sulaymaniyah governorate, where 1,992 of an original 2,035 villages were laid to waste, the Kurdish authorities have rebuilt 1,350. In the Dahuk and Irbil governorates alone, the oil-for-food program has spent $110 million so far on housing units, $27 million on schools, and $9 million on health centers, $37 million on water

projects, and $7 million on sewage channels.(45)

Qualitatively, it is hard to go anywhere in northern Iraq without seeing the fruits of the sanctions-related development. The town of Sa'id Sadiq, razed by Saddam's forces in 1988, had been reconstructed. New schools dot dusty villages near the Turkish border. Sulaymaniyah, Irbil, and Dahuk have new sewer systems, telephone networks, and diesel-fueled 29-megawatt electrical generating plants.

In contrast to the situation in the areas ruled by the central government—which carefully escorts selected delegations and journalists—the ability to travel freely in the north allows an observer to judge the situation more accurately. These achievements are even more relatively impressive since they have been attained despite the constant infighting and lack of cooperation between the two ruling factions, while the rest of the country supposedly enjoys the potential benefits of having a single, well-established government apparatus. The fact that workers from non-UN humanitarian agencies can help in the north, while being barred from Iraqi government areas, is another factor, albeit a marginal one, contributing to the people's improved welfare (the budget of the 17 non-UN international NGOs operating in Iraqi Kurdistan is miniscule, and is generally limited to a few housing projects, a handful of clinics, and a small number of vocational centers.

NUTRITION: THREE MEALS A DAY: THE FRUIT OF SANCTIONS

Ironically, much of the international interpretation of sanctions, prompted by Iraqi propaganda, is the exact opposite of the intent and effort being made. While trying to pressure the Iraqi government to dispense with its WMD programs, the sanctions regime has also tried to force that same government to pay more attention to the needs of its own people.

The health and welfare of those in Iraq has increased tremendously, not only in northern Iraq, but also in Iraq proper, at least when the Iraqi government does not interfere with the implementation of the oil-for-food program. It is difficult to be hungry when receiving oil-for-food rations. Each month, every man, woman, and child in Iraq receives 9 kilograms of wheat flour, 3 kilograms of rice, 2 kilograms of sugar, 0.2 kilograms of tea, 1.5 kilograms of vitamin A-fortified cooking oil, 3.6 kilograms of milk powder, an additional kilogram of dried whole milk and/or cheese, 0.8 kilograms of fortified weaning cereal, 1.5 kilograms of pulses (vegetable protein), and 0.15 kilograms of iodized salt. To ensure that every individual receives the minimum stipulated rations, retail agents are provided with an additional four percent of flour, rice, and pulses, two percent sugar, oil, salt, and 0.5 percent tea above their local needs. All told, rations support a diet of 2,472 kilocalories per day, double the food intake in 1996, before the program's implementation.(46)

As of June 31, 2001, the oil-for-food program had bought more than $7 billion in rations. Contrary to the complaints of some anti-sanctions activists, the UN Security Council had absolutely no food contracts on hold. Importantly, the ration package does not include fresh fruits and vegetables many Iraqis grow themselves, buy in the market, or for which they trade excess. Because the UN does not buy local produce, the
fruits of local agriculture are also cheaper; farmers are desperate for a market.

While still serving as the UN Humanitarian Coordinator in Iraq, Hans Von Sponeck, insinuated that the food basket supplied by the oil-for-food program could be enlarged if the Iraqi government requested it—only Baghdad repeatedly refused to order more food. In November 1999, the Secretary General of the United Nations reported Iraqi government "under procurement" of food was a serious problem. Indeed, for ten months in 1998 and 1999, despite adequate oil-for-food revenue, the Iraqi government simply refused to order pulses, resulting in reduced rations though out the country.(47)

Indeed, Iraqis eat much better than those in most neighboring and regional countries. Most Iraqis interviewed said they ate at least some

meat five times per week. In contrast, Iranians in Tehran said they often eat meat only once per month.(48)

Under the terms of the oil-for-food ration system, every resident of Iraq is entitled to a ration card. Registration centers compile lists of families and households that are then processed at a computer center, copies of which then are distributed to both the retail ration agent and the local food distribution centers. However, interviews with recently displaced persons arriving in the northern safe-haven from Iraqi government-controlled territory indicate that the Iraq government is regularly confiscating the UN ration cards of its own citizens. One woman in Kalar complained that when she refused to divorce her husband, whom the Iraqi government accused of supporting the opposition, the Iraqi government expelled her four children from school and confiscated the family's ration cards.(49) Many residents of the internally-displaced persons camp, all ethnic Kurds or Turkmens expelled from their homes in or near Kirkuk by Saddam's government, reported that police first confiscated their UN ration cards to force them to move.(50)

Many Iraqis find it disturbing that proponents of lifting sanctions on Iraq trust Saddam Hussein to not use food as a weapon, given not only his ongoing violations of international law, but also the precedent of the 1980's, when he waged war not only upon Iran, but also upon his own people

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HEALTHCARE UNDER SANCTIONS

The healthcare situation in the north has also benefited under the oil-for-food program. According to the director of one of northern Iraq's maternity hospitals, fertility is increasing. In 1990, there were 6,669 babies born in the hospital, while a decade later the figure was 11,455. The rise in fertility has not been steady. Indeed, in the early years of sanctions when Kurds also faced a blockade from Saddam, fertility decreased. It stayed below 1990 levels until 1998, when the hospital first felt the sustained benefits of the oil-for-food program. And of course problems and shortages of facilities remain. The doctor complained that on a single table per day, there could be three or four deliveries, not leaving the staff adequate time for sterilizing instruments.(51)

Generally, however, drugs and medical supplies are available, though doctors and medical administrators in the safe haven complain of Iraqi government obstructionism, and an indifferent, inefficient UN bureaucracy that often is unresponsive and slow. The director of one general hospital, for example, complained that endoscopy equipment ordered in Phase III of the oil-for-food program (each phase refers to a six month cycle) still has not arrived. Of the 40 ultrasound monitors requested, only ten had arrived by January 2001. The hospital director complained that he could get no one at the World Health Organization to explain the discrepancy or the status of the equipment order.(52)

Often, vaccinations and other oil-for-food drug purchases fall short of needs.(53) An administrator at a northern Iraqi teaching hospital said that in a single year he must spend approximately $50,000 for medicines outside the oil-for-food program. Ironically, pharmacists say that about 20 percent of drugs on street markets come from Iraqi UN employees siphoning off and selling medicine from UN warehouses in Iraqi government-controlled areas. Since the Iraqi government determines which Iraqis can work for foreign and UN organizations, such jobs often go to Ba'th party loyalists (an issue which also raises issues about the accuracy of UN reports).(54)

Not only do Iraqi officials block the distribution of food and medicine for their "own" people but also attempt to sabotage supplies for the northern safehaven, attempting to weaken the "rebel" government there.

For example, a high-level health ministry official in the north notes that despite having the oil-for-food money and submitting orders well ahead of schedule, the Iraqi government still systematically refused to order enough medicine for the northern governorates. On September 3, 2001, PUK Health Minister

Yadgar Heshmet complained of problems in obtaining such essentials as surgical gloves, sutures, as well as oncology drugs and kidney dialysis machines.(55)

Certainly, the oil-for-food program does not work perfectly, both PUK and KDP health ministry officials and hospital workers agreed that the health care income generated because of the sanctions regime has saved lives and had an overall positive benefit. Far from the images of overcrowded hospitals portrayed on official Iraqi government television and escorted tours for journalist and anti-sanctions activists, hospital pharmacies in Halabja, Sulaymaniyah, Dahuk, Zakho, and Irbil were well-stocked with supplies and no patients shared beds.(56) In Dahuk, the hospital administrators showed newly-delivered Siemens CAT scan and mammography units upon which staff were training.(57) As of June 30, 2001, more than $1.3 billion in medical equipment had arrived in Iraq under the oil-for-food program, with more than $500 million more approved and in the delivery pipeline.(58)

SELECTIVE REPORTING: IS WATER TO BLAME?

Increasingly, anti-sanctions activists blame the quality of water for death and misery in Iraq, and accuse the United States and Britain of deliberately degrading Iraq's water purification systems. In a cover story in the British monthly, *The Progressive*, George Washington University instructor Thomas Nagy argued that, "the U.S. government intentionally used sanctions against Iraq to degrade the country's water supply after the Gulf War."(59) He based his arguments on declassified U.S. Defense Intelligence Agency documents posted on a Defense Department website dedicated to information relating to Gulf War syndrome.(60) He concluded that the U.S. government sought purposely to undermine Iraq's potable water supply in order to increase pressure on Saddam Hussein's regime.

Nagy's analysis is problematic. He relies on documents more than ten years old, and systematically ignores documents written after the war, when a greater flow of information existed. Nagy's citations themselves are quite selective. For example, one document not cited by Nagy concludes, "Restoration of Iraq's public health services and shortages of major medical materiel apparently are being emphatically exploited by Saddam Hussein in an effort to keep public opinion firmly against the U.S. and its Coalition allies and to keep blame away from the Iraqi government."(61) Nagy dismissed another document in the same collection because it had "a distinct damage-control feel to it," even though in this case Nagy appears to apply the "damage control" label because the document provides evidence that contradicts Nagy's thesis.(62) The document in question reads:

"Disease incidence above pre-war levels is more attributable to the regime's inequitable post-war restoration of public health services rather than the effects of the war and United Nations (UN)-imposed sanctions. Although current countrywide infectious disease incidence in Iraq is higher than it was before the Gulf War, it is not at the catastrophic levels that some groups predicted. The Iraqi regime will continue to exploit disease incidence data for its own political purposes."(63)

Nagy concludes by arguing that the U.S. government is guilty of violating the Geneva Convention. While the documentary evidence eviscerates Nagy's conclusions, the case raises ethical questions as to how activists deal with facts on the ground that may contradict political ideology. This problem is heightened in the case of Iraq, since access to the real feelings of ordinary Iraqis still living in the country remains so hard to obtain.

Water purity is a problem is some areas of Iraq, much as it is in areas of southern Iran and Bahrain, where it is heavily saline and not potable. In northern Iraq, quality is extremely good: bottled water is not widely available in Irbil or Sulaymaniyah, and most foreigners drink the water without getting sick. Water is also of adequate quality in large government-controlled cities like Baghdad, Mosul, and Kirkuk, according to Iraqi travelers. However,

the quality of water declines in the predominantly Shi'i cities of Basra and Nasiriya. Nevertheless, the oil-for-food program has already spent more than $1 billion in water and sanitation projects in Iraq.(64)

Baghdad estimates that providing adequate sanitation and water resources would cost an additional $328 million. However, such an allocation is more than possible given the billions of dollars in oil revenue Baghdad receives each year under sanctions, and the additional $1 billion dollars per year it receives from transport of smuggled oil on the Syrian pipeline alone.(65) Indeed, if Saddam Hussein's government has managed to spend more than $2 billion for new presidential palaces since the end of the Persian Gulf War, and offer to donate nearly $1 billion to support the Palestinian intifada, there is no reason to blame sanctions for any degradation in water and sanitation systems.(66)

HOW TO LIE WITH STATISTICS: TRYING TO IGNORE THE NORTH

Northern Iraq presents a problem for both Saddam Hussein and human rights' advocates like those from the American Friends Service Committee, Voices in the Wilderness, and the Campaign Against Sanctions on Iraq ideologically opposed to sanctions. After all, northern Iraq suffered much more damage from war—though ironically mostly at the hands of Iraq's own army—than the rest of the country. Yet that area has been rebuilt due to the sanctions system. The comparison between northern Iraq and the rest of the country puts the onus of responsibility for the humanitarian tragedy on Saddam, not sanctions. Accordingly, many opponents of sanctions actively seek to undermine this comparison.

Some anti-sanctions campaigners argue that the north receives disproportionate income. The root of this complaint is that while the northern governorates receive income proportional to their population, the rest of Iraq is shortchanged because of Iraqi payments to the compensation committee. Indeed, parts of Iraq controlled by Saddam receive just 59 percent of the oil-for-food revenue.(67) If accounted this way, then the north does receive slightly more per capita than the rest of Iraq, but not nearly so much as some anti-sanctions activists claim. They argue that the north receives 22 percent of the total humanitarian income. Actually, the figure is closer to 14.5 percent, when one includes the population of PUK-controlled towns such as Kalar, Kifri, and Darbandikan in the Kirkuk (Ta'mim) governorate.

A former high official in the UN's Office of the Humanitarian Coordinator in Iraq (UNOCHI) also noted that northern Iraq has started from a lower baseline, because Saddam Hussein's government had razed 4,006 out of 4,655 villages, and forced northern Iraq to accommodate more than 800,000 internally-displaced persons, one-quarter of whom have been expelled from their homes in portions of Iraq governed by Saddam Hussein since the end of 1991.(68)

However, even if Iraqi Kurdistan did receive disproportionate income in the early years of the oil-for-food program, the combination of the rise in world oil prices and the five percent increase in the allotment of revenue to go to Baghdad means that the portion of Iraq administered by Saddam should be doing at least as well as Iraqi Kurdistan had been. The per capita income available in Saddam's Iraq is now far higher than it was in Iraqi Kurdistan, and yet the Iraqi government continues to either not spend the revenue available, or not spend it wisely.(69)

Opponents of sanctions also sometimes dismiss northern Iraq's success under sanctions because of the so-called "cash component" granted to northern Iraq by the United Nations.(70) The United Nations pays the administrative costs to implement its programs in northern Iraq, but the Iraqi government has to pay the implementation costs in the portion of the country it administers. The reasoning behind this is that the UN is administering the oil-for-food program in the northern Iraqi governorates on behalf of the government of Iraq, and does not formally recognize the

democratically elected administration in northern Iraq. Further, the northern administration developed in a vacuum created by the unilateral withdrawal of Iraqi government administration in 1991. While the center-south controlled by Saddam Hussein enjoys basic governmental infrastructure, northern Iraq initially did not. Northern Iraq's success comes despite constant impediments laid down by Baghdad which, under terms of the 1996 Memorandum of Understanding, has acquired the means to block visas for UN workers and thus derail UN programs. The latest report by the Secretary-General of the UN on Phase X of the oil-for-food program concluded, "the effective implementation of the [oil-for-food] programme in the three northern governorates…has also been adversely affected by the inordinate delays in the granting of visas to United Nations personnel, as well as the difficulties encountered in the importation of esential equipment and supplies."(71) Most damning to arguments about disproportionate funding in the north is that, according to oil-for-food coordinators in Irbil, northern Iraq has so far only spent half the money actually allocated to it.

Often, the anti-sanctions crowd argues that the blame for any lack of recovery in Saddam's Iraq lies not with Saddam's administration, but with the holds placed on goods at the behest of the United States. It is true that some material is on hold. For example, after the chemical weapons attacks of the 1980s, the United Nations does look suspiciously upon requests for crop dusters and aerial sprayers. However, only 13 percent of the total contracts (by value) are on hold, and many of these will be allowed to proceed once the Iraqi government completes missing paper work or elaborates on where and how the goods will be used (72).

It is true that the United Nations bureaucracy is slow, clumsy, and inefficient, but UN ineptitude remains constant over both northern Iraq and those regions controlled by Saddam, and therefore cannot be considered a major reason for suffering. Rather, much of the problem rests in the Iraqi government simply refusing to order goods. For example, as of September 15, 2001, the Iraqi government had failed to even allocate almost $2 billion dollars.

When the Iraqi government does proceed with contracting, it inexplicably delays submitting the paperwork to the United Nations. According to the latest report of the Secretary General of the United Nations, the Iraqi government tends to wait between a month and a month and a half between signing contracts and submitting relevant applications to United Nations committees.(73)

CONCLUSIONS

The success of northern Iraq under sanctions poses a challenge to anti-sanctions activists, who continue to cling to the hypothesis that it is sanctions and not Saddam Hussein causing suffering in Iraq. However, rather than dismiss such evidence (and harming ordinary Iraqis in the process), the human rights community should instead embrace the sanctions on Iraq as a tool to rebuild the society and protect basic human rights for people living under an uncaring dictatorship. In condemning the sanctions regime, the implicit argument is that the benign Saddam Hussein government wants to take care of its people and is being prevented from exercising its humanitarian intention by foreign imperialists who are the real war criminals. One can well doubt that the Iraqi people themselves accept this interpretation, though they are unlikely to say so in public precisely because they know the brutality of that government. The day after the "smart sanctions" plan was announced, an Iraqi farmer near the Iranian border asked me, "Why do they talk about war crimes one day, and reward Saddam the next?"(74)

Relatively few non-military tools exist in peacetime to change the behavior of rogue regimes, regardless of how one chooses to define them. Sanctions remain a powerful tool that should not be abandoned. In the case of Iraq, sanctions can be used to preserve basic rights. Lifting sanctions would allow Saddam Hussein to renew his aggressive policy and encourages others to behave the same way.

Moreover, it would not benefit and might well even harm the Iraqi people.

Given the fact that Saddam prefers to have sanctions rather than give up his WMD capacity, and that he has spent billions of dollars on presidential palaces and a special amusement park for Baath Party officials, it is hard to argue that the triumph of human rights and humanitarian considerations require returning Iraqis to his total control.(75).

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