

Sanctions on Iraq: Until when?

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Sanctions here, sanctions there, sanctions everywhere. First Cuba and South Africa, then Libya, Iraq, Afghanistan, Liberia, and Kosovo. Who will be next on the list? How many more nations must be put under sanctions, how many more people must suffer and endure the effects of sanctions, before this method of punishment is eliminated?

If sanctions are to be an instrument supported by the church in the future, we need to ask seriously if they really help to resolve or create conflicts, eliminate or increase poverty, prevent or exacerbate disease, eradicate or foster illiteracy, all traditional plagues affecting developing countries. The evidence from the case of Iraq suggests that the negative impacts of sanctions by far outweigh any positive potential they may have had as an instrument for peace.

How can we as advocates of ending sanctions against Iraq, be heard by those who have imposed them in the West?

To separate sanctions from economics is impossible. The West is arming the Middle East and yet is accusing it of misuse of its military weapons. What is needed is a new regional approach. The roots of militarisation in the region should be addressed in order to put an end to the existing belligerence. Who is selling these weapons and for what purpose? There is a dire need to understand conflict in the light of these military economic realities, in order to plan a common strategy for addressing disarmament in the Middle East if peace is to prevail.

What the Middle East needs is a lengthy re-evaluation of Western policies in every significant area. Given the narrow parameters governing these policies, it may seem futile to try to convince those in the West of the injustices against the Arab people. What we can show is that certain policies, like the sanctions imposed on Iraq, are in fact inefficient and counter productive.

The churches' concern

The churches are a living witness and need to continue to address the sanctions seriously, respond appropriately, and interact with the issues and communities affected. The concept of sanctions is a sin that weighs heavily on the churches. While the churches are very concerned about the ramifications of sanctions, there is still a huge need for the churches to build on their central role in the witness against Iraq sanctions. Up to now, the emphasis has tended to be on the political and economic spheres, thus diminishing the focus on the spiritual dimensions, where the church has the most authority to speak.

The lack of understanding of the issue of Iraq is the main cause for Iraq not having a normal relationship with the West. On the issue of sanctions, Iraq has a strong and just cause. What Iraq needs are people of integrity to present its cause to the whole world. There is a need for a plan and a strategy for better understanding in order to help ease the conflict and build a just and durable peace, without which no solution in the region is to be reached. The churches, in the region and abroad, could facilitate this process.

Nutritional situation

The nutritional situation remains a major concern in spite of interventions carried out by NGOs, UNICEF, and other UN supplementary nutritional programmes. The following are some excerpts about food and nutrition collected from recent reports by UNICEF and the UN's Food and Agriculture Organisation:

?The nutritional situation is still serious in the Centre-South of Iraq despite some progress under the Oil for Food Programme. Malnutrition among children is prevalent, mainly outside Baghdad and in rural areas, reflecting the effects of drought and poverty. Child malnutrition rates have not improved significantly and nutritional problems remain serious and widespread. The indication of

high levels of malnutrition explains the continuing high levels of infant and child mortality, which according to UNICEF, has more than doubled since the end of 1980s.?

?The nutritional status of school children is a cause for concern especially for those rural areas and poor households. Deficiencies in micronutrients are common and iron deficiency anaemia is high.?

?The food rations distributed nation-wide do not provide a nutritionally adequate and varied diet. Rations are reasonable adequate in energy and total protein, still they lack vegetables, fruits and animal products. Many households cannot afford to supplement their diet with an adequate variety of micronutrient rich foods.?

?Malnutrition is also a result of poor water and poor sanitation resulting in infections leading to infant and child malnutrition. The rehabilitation of the water and sanitation systems are priorities. Iraq's importation of equipment and materials to purify water has been improved significantly, but delays in the approval of contracts has had a damaging impact on the population's health and sanitation. Cash flow is still a major problem for rehabilitation and reconstruction of the water and sewerage systems.?

?Agriculture in Iraq has deteriorated significantly in the past few years, due to consecutive years of severe drought, lack of investment, and a shortage of essential agricultural inputs. The good rains which fell during the winter of 2001, give a better prospective for irrigated and summer crops, of which results will appear at the end of the summer.?

Pressing issues to be addressed by international communities

The following areas are of particular concern and may help to focus discussions related to sanctions and Iraq.

Legality. The sanctions have resulted in extreme social and economic suffering which is contrary to the aims of the Charter of the United Nations. Sanctions with such devastating effects should not be permitted to continue. It is time for the UN to reconsider its role in this complex situation, and to take action in accordance with international norms. It is clear by now that Iraq will not give up its legitimate call for a comprehensive and total lifting of the embargo. For Iraq, it is a matter of sovereignty as an independent nation with membership in the United Nations. Iraq believes that the sanctions regime is an attempt to drag them back to the colonial era, and they are adamantly refusing to accept it.

Economics. The sanctions have curtailed employment in the region. At one time, Iraq supported 5 million migrant workers from the region, mainly unskilled and poor, who were able to prosper and build a better future. The conflict in the region, followed by the sanctions, makes this impossible today. The potential role of Iraq as a positive influence in the region should not be dismissed. The present estimated unemployment rate has reached 65%, which is very alarming. Restrictions on how money from the ?Oil for Food? programme can be used have not allowed Iraq to engage in macro-economic projects which would help to generate work for the millions of unemployed. Emigration of the educated and skilled is on the increase and this will definitely have an impact on the future of Iraq.

Fundamentalism. With the rise of fundamentalism in Iraq after the Gulf War, Islam emerged as a political force, accusing Western powers of new colonialism to weaken Islam. Moslem religious services reflect significant animosities towards the West. If the sanctions continue to inflict unjustifiable suffering, the results may be very explosive and will have devastating results. One cannot ignore the rising negative attitudes, mainly among youth, in the whole Arab region which is a result of the ongoing conflict in Palestine and the sanctions against Iraq.

International relations. Iraq has a wealth of human and material resources, including but not limited to oil. The sanctions undermine social, cultural, intellectual and economic links with the

international community. Given the extreme alienation of an entire generation of Iraqi youth, we need to ask, what will be the impact on the future role of these young people as global citizens? Iraq should not be isolated. Efforts should be made to reinstate Iraq's position in the international community.

Palestine/Jerusalem. The problem of Palestine and what is happening there is a major concern for every Arab and Moslem. The Palestinian problem is the main focus of the Arab media. Palestinian children are being beaten and shot at, their homes are being demolished, and Arab land is confiscated for housing projects for new Jewish immigrants from Europe. This is causing severe indignation and alarm for every Arab and Moslem who are already questioning Western policies in the region. This situation is resulting in radical attitudes among young people. Though this is not a new thing, we ignore it at the peril of a whole generation who will have to live with the ongoing violence that will surely result. The voluntary recruitment of 6 million Iraqis for the cause of Palestine and Jerusalem reflects the seriousness of the situation and emphasises the regional links between these all encompassing issues.

Removing land mines. The amount of money being spent for de-mining in the autonomous areas is being questioned by the Government of Iraq. A total of \$87 million was budgeted by the UN to remove 3,500 mines placed in the border areas between Iraq and Iran. The estimated cost of each mine is \$3-5 in comparison to \$22,000 for removing each one. Special dogs, their trainers, with vehicles are being used in these efforts. Given the extreme needs in so many crucial areas, this budget is seen by the Government of Iraq as exorbitant, even though many advocates for peace and justice might see long-term benefits for such a programme.

Electricity. A total of one billion dollars was budgeted by the UN for electricity in the Autonomous Kurdish areas. Four years of work, with technicians hired from abroad to carry out the reconstruction and rehabilitation of electrical power stations in the North, have resulted in one hour of electricity per day. The UN technicians refused to link the power stations to the Central electrical grid to reduce time and expenditure. The Iraqi Central and Kurdish Authorities are very critical that so much money has been spent with so little achieved.

Contract expedition. The list of commodities ordered by Iraqis in comparison to the budget allocated for the different sectors, indicates delays and that many items are still being put on hold by the UN Sanctions Committee. The Committee claims that these items have double usage and could be used for military purposes. Items received in the vital sectors, such as education, irrigation, communication and transport, which could help in major improvements, are below 10%. The oil industry has become dilapidated and needs complete overhauling which will require massive inputs of machinery and spare-parts. What Iraq has received is 16% of what is needed. Iraq has had to employ unprofessional methods of production to increase their oil production to secure their needs. This will have negative effects on future production, making it more costly. This cripples Iraq, preventing it from achieving improvement in any sector. What supplies they are able to get is only enough to do patchwork?.

Income disparity. There is disparity of income between the UN staff and Iraqis. A total of US\$ 700 million has been budgeted for administrative expenses for UN staff working on the Iraq programme in the last 4 years. A total of 1,400 persons has been involved in the implementation of the programme in New York, Geneva, and Iraq. The average Iraqi salary is in the range of US\$ 10-25 per month in comparison to UN staff who receive \$5,000- 15,000 per month. Iraq is unable to raise money from the imposition of taxes to cover the salaries of its 1.8 million civil servants (according to the Iraqi Statistical Department). This is a significant load on the Iraqi government, because the 'Oil for Food' Programme prevents Iraq from having access to cash flow. The dispute continues between the UN and Iraq on the cash flow issue, thus preventing progress in all sectors.

Growing animosity. Iraqis are embittered by the sanctions. They feel the isolation, and the pressures put on them to give up their resources, pressures which ignore Iraq's long heritage and the contributions that helped the Western Renaissance after the Middle Ages. They have seen

their children and parents dying for simple reasons that could be prevented due to lack of medicines. Many families have been reduced to poverty and their children have become beggars in the streets of Iraq. There is total denunciation of Western ideologies, United Nations principles, and the Charter of Human Rights, and a growing animosity towards the West which will have widespread impact on future relationships of all kinds.

Rebuilding dialogue and confidence

There is little real dialogue between Iraq and the United Nations, especially with the US and the UK who are the primary supporters of sanctions. Iraq claims that the American administration has hegemony over the Security Council. Iraq is a country with an influential weight at the international and regional levels; it is a country that should not be ignored. There are issues that should be addressed, such as oil, disarmament, Palestine, Jerusalem, and the legality of sanctions. How can these be addressed without dialogue between all of the significant players in this tragedy?

There exists an element of mistrust between Iraq and the UN. This is preventing many negotiations which could lead to better understanding and the resolution of many issues. There are many existing contentious issues that should be addressed immediately and seriously. The suffering of the people is so great that it cannot be ignored. The radical upheaval that could result from all of this will produce an even greater backlash against the West.

The churches in the Middle East are convinced that the existing conflicts in the region cannot be settled unless the opposing groups come to the negotiating table afresh. The churches can help to ease the tensions by assisting with peace-building processes, reinforcing confidence building measures and acting as mediators when invited to do so. The visits of church leaders to Iraq during the past several months are indicative of the seriousness of the problems existing in the region as a whole. Though the number of Christians in the Middle East is small, their role is vital in the process of building reconciliation and peace.

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