

Sanctions on Iraq: A criminal policy that needs honest media coverage

Hans von Sponeck

I think this is an important moment because the Iraq discussion is at a crossroads and honesty and media can play an important role in deciding in which direction this discussion develops.

Before I talk about media and sanctions against Iraq. I want to say, as I always try to say at the beginning, you don't know me. I'm not a fanatic, nor am I an apologist. And to be anti-sanctions doesn't mean you are for the President of Iraq, necessarily. And I also want to say: lawlessness of one kind is not carte blanche for lawlessness of another kind.

What I want to do in the time that I have is to express four concerns and talk about what I believe are nine very serious cover-ups. First, two very powerful statistics that underline the brutal reality that exists in Iraq. On 29 November 2000 the UN Secretary General submitted a report to the Security Council. One has to read these reports very carefully to understand the real story. This one had figures which are truly sobering even to me. In four years of the oil-for-food programme, US\$8.8 billion of humanitarian supplies actually arrived in Iraq. This means that over four years, 22 million people are getting \$110 dollars per person per year.

The other frightening statistic is contained in the 2001 State of the Children Report, which shows that in Iraq there is a regression rate of 167% for child mortality ? higher than anywhere else in the world.

A lot of what you hear of what you see, of what you read, about Iraq, is a story of death. What about the story of life? If you look again at United Nations documentation, you will see among other things that a study carried out shows that the incidence of disease in children under 14 has continuously risen. Talk to United Nations specialists and you hear a lot about insomnia, you hear a lot about stress among adults. You also hear about the air-raid sirens. What happens when the sirens sound and the reaction of children. How often does that happen? Practically every day air-raid sirens are heard in Iraq.

What has happened to the ordinary people of Iraq? The middle class has emigrated. The middle class has not been replaced professionally. It is a de-professionalisation of professionals in Iraq. In my time we carried out a survey among UN Iraqi employees. It showed that 66% of the Iraqi staff were working in menial general services ? efforts that had nothing to do with the professional training they received. I think this symptomatic. Take sanctions breaking. There are people in Iraq, a small group, who take every advantage of the porous borders, with the result that a tremendous social transformation is taking place. It is an extreme polarisation, with the vast majority of people at one end and enrichment at the other. And this is fully known to the international community.

There's a complete reversal of in the social progress of the 1970s and 1980s in terms of education, in terms of opportunities for foreign experience, in terms of all the things that you and I consider important in our lives. There was even a balance between men and women in terms of life opportunity. That's gone too.

Recently I spent a day at a University in Baghdad talking to students. What did they tell me? They said, ?We want to have an equal share in the opportunity to gain knowledge. We want to understand. We want to have modern knowledge. We want to use modern tools of learning.? And two of them said, ?Well, we want to study in peace.? And let us remember here that that in 1991, at the beginning of this drama, the US actually stated that Iraq had been pushed back to a pre-industrial age. What about ten years ? ten long years ? later? Industry, commerce, may be working at 10% of capacity. Sixty to 75% of adults are unemployed.

Aren't we making an immense farce out of the international instruments that are meant to protect individuals, including Iraqis? What about Article 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights? It has two components: the right to education and, to me, more importantly, the right to the full development of the human person. No chance in Iraq!

The oil-for-food scheme is a very important programme. But severely, severely inadequate. Despite what I call 'the \$110 scandal,' \$100 per person per year UN Ambassador Cunningham (for the US) said, on 5 December 2000, in the Security Council, 'We [the US Government] are satisfied that the oil-for-food programme meets the needs of the Iraqi people.' \$110 per year? I can hardly believe that anyone could make a statement like that.

International law and cover-ups

I want to talk about the cover-ups, but first I want to tell you that my second concern is how the international community treats international law in the case of Iraq. It is overwhelmingly evident to me that the UN Security Council of today is a violator of the very laws that it and governments represented in the Security Council helped to create to protect innocent civilians. I do not say this lightly.

I cannot agree with my former colleague, Richard Butler and the chapter in his book entitled *The Principle of Exception*. He argues that international law applies to 188 member countries, but not to the 189th member country. In other words, international law is available to everyone except Iraq. I think that's a scandal, and I think media must point this out. The time factor has made such an enormous difference. What was legal in 1990 and 1991 - defensible then - is illegal and indefensible ten years later.

Professor Boies Schutt [???spelling???], an international law expert prepared a report for the United Nations. It's an important document because it shows that even now honest voices still have a chance to speak out in the United Nations. I want to read to you what he had to say about Iraqi sanctions and international law:

'The sanctions regime against Iraq is unequivocally (missing word) under international humanitarian law and human rights law. Some would go as far as making the charge of genocide... The sanctions regime against Iraq has as its clear purpose the deliberate infliction on the Iraqi people of conditions life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part. It doesn't matter that this physical destruction has as its ostensible objection the security of the region.'

I think this is very powerful language. He repeated this and was joined at the Human Rights Commission in Geneva by a whole chorus of other people who are speaking out. And into the discussion comes a very interesting new concept: the undue future burden effect. What is happening now and the effect it has in the future, particularly on the young, those who have nothing to do with the political conflict, and who are the most severely punished.

My third concern relates disinformation and cover-up, and if I were being less friendly, I would call it 'organised lying.' What we see and read is very often an example of organised lying.

Since we resigned, Denis Halliday and I have met the whole spectrum of journalists from the honest, well-intentioned, professional journalists in all parts of the world, including the Middle East. Al Jazeera [??? Spelling???] has established a data base on Iraq. You can click in and you can see a profile of Iraq issues. They have consulted people, asked them to put down their aims and honest views. Here is a professional Arab media that is trying to shed light on the subject. Alongside you have media ignorance - people who are individually incompetent and who report on this complex issue. There's also the problem of lack of funding, lack of tools. It costs a lot of money to get the story on Iraq right, and that is sometimes lacking. And you have - and that's the worst, I think, in journalism - you have complicity with the decision-makers, and there are many example of such complicity.

One should not exaggerate what is needed to equip a journalist to report on Iraq. The first thing on my list is ethical behaviour, honesty. The second is professional training in investigative journalism in the Middle East. One can learn this. Journalists must also have a basic understanding of the United Nations Charter and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights before they attempt to report on Iraq. You have to have a balanced exposure to contacts. You cannot just go and make contact with one group and hear the same story and not listen to the other, which is too often the case in Iraq. And you have to travel to Iraq. The government of Iraq will allow anybody to come in to Iraq who has a record of honest reporting. Whether they are American or Chinese or European doesn't matter.

The problem is, to go back to George Orwell, that there is the temptation and the reality of that fateful mix, the 'cocktail' of fiction and reality that is prepared every day. And it has to be drunk by the international community - that's bad enough. But with all the consequences, it has to be drunk by the Iraqi people, and that I think, is the challenge for those who want to report on Iraq.

Nine cover-ups

Finally, there are nine areas where I feel there is a very serious media cover-up or, governmental cover-up, in reporting the truth on Iraq.

1) No coverage of built-in obstacles to running the 'oil-for-food' programme, e.g. US\$3.4 billion dollars worth of contracts 'on hold' blocked right now by the Security Council. The public does not know enough about this. There are also controls on UN staff who make decisions, internal manipulation of UN staff by member states, and manipulation of reports.

2) The UN Security Council is supposed to monitor the sanctions, but this is not being done. In addition, the measures of control that UN staff in Iraq normally have are, in fact, being dictated by the UN/US.

3) The 'no fly zone' has no UN mandate. Since December 1998 the 'no fly zone' has been subject to enlarged rules of engagement. The cost to US and UK taxpayers is enormous.

4) The mandate of the UN Human Rights rapporteur focuses on Iraqi violations only.

5) The operation of UN Compensation Commission is biased: it gets 30% of every dollar given to Iraq which is used for administration costs in Geneva. The Iraqi government only has observer status, and manipulation of amounts compensated makes the Commission encourage exaggerated and/or fraudulent claims.

6) The impact of depleted uranium needs to be studied scientifically by the WHO. There has also been harassment of Gulf War Syndrome victims.

7) Iraqi oil industry/production: \$600 million worth of spare parts for repairs are on hold. Iraq cannot produce more oil because of the current state of its industry. The no. 1 importer of Iraqi oil is the USA.

8) The oil-for-food programme is destroying Iraqi agriculture. Iraqi food producing areas, mostly in the Kurdish areas, cannot market in Baghdad and southern cities; Kurdish wheat cannot be sold in Iraq and cannot be exported. Agricultural production is almost at a standstill.

9) The way disarmament has been reported is misleading. Iraqi equipment is 'old stuff with new paint' and Iraq is a third world country in terms of its military strength and preparedness.

In the light of the above, I would like to argue that we forget oil-for-food. Use oil income for national reconstruction, the economy, health, and education. We must encourage the world community to think in terms of a post-sanctions era. The current policy is not just at fault, it is criminal.

Hans von Sponeck was UN Humanitarian Co-ordinator for Iraq, 1998-2000.