

Globe and Mail, May 13, 2003

Lift the Sanctions – Weapons of Mass Destruction

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Last week, U.S. officials began pressing the Security Council to lift international sanctions on Iraq. Russia, France and others have resisted the move, saying the embargo should be lifted only when UN weapons inspectors have certified that Iraq is free of weapons of mass destruction.

The U.S. is loath to let UN weapons inspectors back in, however, saying its own specialists are doing the job. At the same time, U.S. occupation officials are eager to get the sanctions lifted, so that they can use Iraq's oil revenues to rebuild the country. U.S. and other contractors are ready to begin work, but they can't get paid until Iraqi oil starts flowing.

Ironically, it was the same U.S. government that was responsible, along with Britain, for keeping sanctions in place throughout the 1990s. This was true even after it became clear the embargo was killing large numbers of Iraqi civilians due to the resulting poverty, poor sewage treatment facilities, and crumbling health-care systems.

Regardless of one's views on the war, everyone should favour immediately lifting the sanctions. Strange as it may seem, U.S. and British war-making has been one of the least deadly policy tools used to coerce Saddam Hussein in the past 12 years. The antisancctions campaign never triggered mass protests in Western cities, but sanctions were far more deadly than all the U.S. guns, bombs and missiles combined.

Consider these figures. During the recent invasion, the U.S.-led coalition killed some 2,500 Iraqi civilians, according to a media survey by Iraqbodycount.org. Although there are few reliable figures on Iraqi military casualties, they are likely to be in the thousands. During the 1991 gulf war, according to Human Rights Watch and others, allied forces killed approximately 3,500 Iraqi civilians, and 56,000 soldiers. Western forces, in other words, killed 6,000 Iraqi civilians with guns and bombs during the past 12 years, as well as a possible 60,000 Iraqi soldiers.

Contrast these numbers with the deaths attributable to sanctions.

From 1991 to 1998, sanctions killed about 400,000 Iraqi civilians -- a conservative estimate that comes from Israeli academic Amatzia Baram. Although his study aimed to debunk inflated Iraqi mortality figures, Prof. Baram readily acknowledged the embargo's deadly effects on Iraq's poorest and most vulnerable.

Despite being critical of most Western studies, Prof. Baram was impressed by a careful study done by Columbia University researcher Richard Garfield, who estimated 100,000 to 227,000 "excess deaths" of children up to five years of age in the 1991-1998 period alone. According to Mr. Garfield, most of these deaths were caused by diarrhea and respiratory ailments.

These and other studies show that by restricting Iraq's oil sales and international trade, sanctions dealt a severe blow to Iraq's economy and public-health infrastructure. Politically connected groups and wealthy individuals were able to cope, but Iraq's most vulnerable populations were hit hard.

Iraq's infrastructure had already been devastated by the 1991 gulf war to undo Iraq's occupation of Kuwait. A Shia rebellion in Iraq's south, coupled with brutal government repression, led to more devastation and 30,000 casualties.

After the 1991 war, the Security Council demanded that Saddam Hussein destroy all weapons of mass destruction and ordered him to sell Iraqi oil through UN channels. He resisted until 1997, when the "oil-for-food" program finally came into effect. Although the country's economic situation improved, vital resources remained scarce.

For sure, Saddam's regime manipulated sanctions-induced scarcity during the 1990s, channeling resources and goods to sympathizers and the military. Had the regime created a more equitable distribution policy, tens of thousands of lives would have been saved. Saddam's culpability, however, does not absolve the U.S., British and other pro-sanctions governments. Everyone knew Saddam was no democrat; no one was surprised when he treated Iraq's weakest sectors poorly.

If voters in the U.S., Canada or Britain had been asked early on whether they were willing to kill 400,000 civilians, few would have said yes, no matter how laudable the policy goal. Common decency would have suggested that other methods should be found. Sanctions proved far deadlier than all the U.S. and British bombs combined, yet it was only the spectre of a shooting war that brought hundreds of thousands of protesters into the streets.

If these people are serious about creating a more humane world, they should ask themselves where they were while sanctions were wreaking their silent but deadly effects. Meanwhile, they should go back into the streets, this time to support U.S. efforts to end the embargo.

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