

Witness: A Human Being Living in Iraq

letter from Nihal

March 2003

Date: Wed, 26 Mar 2003 07:48:49 -0800

Dick Couto is one of the faculty in Antioch University's Ph.D. in Leadership and Change program. In January he was a member of a group of about 30 academics invited to Iraq by Baghdad University to discuss options for peace. While there he made a strong connection with a young woman named Nihal. Below is a recent email from Nihal. Peace

Michael Duffin, Associate Director
Center for Environmental Education of Antioch New England Institute
40 Avon St., Keene, NH 03431-3516, (603) 355-3251
michael@anei.org, www.SchoolsGoGreen.org

"Nfa_2" nfa@coolgoose.com writes:

Dear Mr. Couto,

The bombing has truly started. The first two nights were terrible, but last night was beyond awful. I don't know if I can find the words to describe what was happening. The air-raid began at around 8:15 pm. The bombing wasn't particularly heavy until around 9:00. Suddenly, the night sky was lit with white and red -- a combination of American missiles and Iraqi anti-aircraft. The first explosion I heard was huge and it felt like it had fallen particularly close. We were more or less prepared, but found ourselves rushing to the make-shift 'shelter' we had arranged inside a closet on the first floor.

The children were herded inside and pillows and blankets arranged to provide maximum protection and we followed after. Everyone was silent, except for murmured prayers and stifled tears. The children were told to cover their ears and keep their mouths open -- in case a missile explode close by so that the pressure wouldn't damage their hearing.

It felt like the explosions were coming from everywhere at once. There were one or two that were so powerful that two of the windows on the second floor cracked. Luckily, no one was hurt. People in other places weren't so fortunate.

I stayed up all night Mr. Couto, because I refuse to fall asleep and wake up to the sound of explosions. I'd rather be awake and aware -- the shock is less. I spent the night staring up at the sky and trying to determine what was being damaged. It seems all of Baghdad was being bombed simultaneously.

When people ask me what being bombed is like, I always compare it to thunder . . . I realized yesterday that it's not comparable to anything. The walls shudder, the windows rattle, and lights flicker . . . and through it all you see the faces of the people you love apprehensive, frightened, angry . . .

The faces of the children are the most difficult to see. We're staying with my aunt and she has children of her own. They are silent throughout, stoic in a heart-breaking way. We all find our strength in the belief that everything is written -- we will face whatever we have to face.

I held my youngest brother throughout the bombing. We were each saying our own prayers. I was praying that we would come out of this alive, safe, and unhurt and he was praying that, should we die, we'd all end up in heaven together. It wrenched my heart to hear him, but the thought was giving him comfort.

He's 12, the same age I was in 1991 -- but there are so many differences in our outlook. I was shocked by the war, shocked that America could do what it was doing. He has been expecting it, in his mind America is associated with livid skies, angry explosions and violence. For him, the bombing has become an expected way of life. To him, the sound of an airplane overhead can only mean death somewhere else.

Mr. Couto, it's unfair. It's unjust -- children shouldn't have to pray for their lives, they shouldn't have to pray for a peaceful, painless death. I've been dreading this war not because of the way it will affect me personally, but because of the fact that it will imprint itself in the minds of millions of children all over Iraq, the same way it imprinted itself in mine in 1991.

We heard about the locations that were demolished only this morning. It is amazing, compared to the news on the internet. *CNN* and the rest make it sound so neat and precise -- they don't mention the fact that one of the palaces that was bombed contained the royal family's museum or that 19 missiles fell on a residential area killing dozens and wounding others. No one talks about the hundreds wounded by shrapnel from missiles or the resulting fires. No one talks about the moments of awesome fear while wondering if your friends and family all over Baghdad, all over Iraq, in fact, are still alive.

My heart feels like it's breaking . . . When I think about all the damage being done by each one of those missiles, it tears me apart. To think of Baghdad being demolished, of so many people dying and hurt; it is beyond my comprehension. I don't think I'll ever be able to understand it.

Now you look out at Baghdad and the streets are almost empty, the sky, which is normally blue this time of year, is a dull gray -- it's the color of smoke from the several fires lighting up different parts of the city.

With all the sadness and anxiety there's anger. It's the only thing that keeps me sane -- that keeps us all sane. This war will never be justified and there are going to be so many lives lost on both sides. It's frightening that the world is allowing this to happen -- what has the world come to? What's going to happen next?

I still have nightmares from 1991. I wake up in the middle of the night to the sound of sirens in my head, images of people buried under debris, burned beyond recognition. Over the years I wondered when I would ever stop seeing those images, now it feels like they're going to remain with me forever. My youngest brother will also carry them with him from now on. Will we ever be allowed to forget?

Even as I write this, I can hear the sound of the explosions -- not too distant and I'm wondering who it's going to fall on next.

Nihal

See Also:

- Iraq Peace Team:
 - Daily Diaries from people in Iraq
 - Iraq Updates
- Electronic Iraq - War Is Our Common Enemy - an online news project
 - Iraq Diaries
 - International Law
 - The Media
 - Fact Sheets
- Voices in the Wilderness
a campaign to end the economic sanctions against the people in Iraq
- Red Cross Horrified by Number of Dead Civilians, *CRV.ca, Canadian Press*, 4/4/03
- View some of the world beyond commercial western press:
 - English translations of IRAQWAR.RU, Russian journalists & military experts
 - *Al-Ahram*, Cairo (est. 1875)
 - *Al-Jazeera*
- From Campaign Against Sanctions on Iraq:
 - Where to find the latest news about Iraq - very current, well-maintained
 - Internal UN documents on the humanitarian impact of war on Iraq
Released by Campaign Against Sanctions on Iraq (CASI) / Emergency Campaign on Iraq - Center for Economic and Social Rights (CESR) on 13 February 2003.
 - CESR obtained these confidential documents from several UN personnel who believe that the potential humanitarian impact of war is a matter of global public concern that should be discussed fully and openly.
 - **Source:** Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, "Integrated Humanitarian Contingency Plan for Iraq and Neighbouring Countries", confidential draft, 7 January 2003.
 - **Key Quotes:**
 - **"In the event of a crisis, 30 percent of children under 5 would be at risk of death from malnutrition"** [p. 3(5)]
Note: * 30% of 4.2 million children under five [p. 3(5)] = 1.26 million children under five
 - "the collapse of essential services in Iraq ... could lead to a humanitarian emergency of proportions well beyond the capacity of UN agencies and other aid organizations" [p. 4(6)]
 - "all UN agencies have been facing severe funding constraints that are preventing them from reaching even minimum levels of preparedness" [p. 1(3)]
 - "the effects of over 12 years of sanctions, preceded by war, have considerably increased the vulnerability of the population". [p. 3(5)]
 - "WFP [world food programme] estimates that approximately 10 million people ... would be highly food insecure displaced or directly affected by military action" [p. 11(13)]
 - "in the event of a crisis, only 39 percent of the population would be serviced [with water] on a rationed basis" [p. 12(14)]
 - "UNHCR estimates that up to 1.45 million refugees and asylum-seekers may seek to flee Iraq in the event of a military conflict" [p. 9(11)]
 - "Up to 900,000 people may be displaced in addition to the 900,000-1,100,000 existing IDPs [internally displaced persons]" [p. 10(12)]
 - [from tables on p. 12(14)]
 - 5,210,000 are highly vulnerable children under five and pregnant and lactating women.
 - 500,000 potential direct and indirect casualties (overall population).
 - 3,020,000 at nutritional risk (overall population).
 - 18,240,000 might need access to treated water.
 - 8,710,000 may need sanitation facilities.
- Marking the twelfth anniversary of sanctions on Iraq:
Iraq Sanctions: Humanitarian Implications and Options for the Future, 6 August 2002
Anglican Observer Office at the UN, Arab Commission for Human Rights, Center for Development of International Law, Center for Economic and Social Rights, Fellowship of Reconciliation, Global Policy Forum, New Internationalism Project, Institute for Policy Studies, Mennonite Central Committee, Middle East and Europe Office of Global Ministries of the United Church of Christ and the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), Quaker UN Office-New York, United Church of Christ UN Office World Economy, Ecology and Development Association (WEED), in association with Save the Children UK