

Weapons of Mass Destruction -- Iraq's Forgotten Bio-War

By Ramzi Kysia

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BAGHDAD, IRAQ -- At first glance, Saddam Pediatric Hospital is a dark, grim place: the walls need painting, less than a third of the lights work, and the hallways are overflowing with parents seeking medical treatment for their children. According to UNICEF reports, at least 500,000 Iraqi children have died over the last 11 years as a result of Gulf War bombings and sanctions.

Dr. Thomas Nagy, a Holocaust survivor and professor at George Washington University in Washington D.C., claims that hospitals like Saddam Pediatric are on the frontlines of a modern-day Holocaust. After analyzing recently declassified U.S. military documents that describe plans to destroy Iraq's civilian water supply during the Gulf War, Dr. Nagy now believes he has the evidence to make his charges stick. In a controversial paper presented to the Association of Genocide Scholars in the United States this summer, Dr. Nagy argues that the purposeful destruction of Iraq's water treatment facilities amounted to "a plan for achieving extermination without the need of constructing extermination camps."

Dr. Rania Masri, an environmental scientist at the U.S. Institute for Southern Studies, also believes that the United States is waging what amounts to biological warfare against Iraqi civilians. Says Dr. Masri, "When the United States bombed water and sewage treatment centers throughout Iraq during the Gulf War, and then blockaded their repair with the sanctions, it was entirely predictable that massive numbers of people would get sick and die. This is a form of biological warfare, and it is both illegal and profoundly immoral."

Dr. Ragheed Ryadh, a young resident at Saddam Pediatric, quietly describes having to treat critically ill children despite shortages of proper medications and equipment, such as incubators. Shortages are a fact of life in Iraq under sanctions. He points to the babies struggling for life in the few incubators the hospital does have and calmly states, "there is a decrease in average body weight of newborns due to malnourished mothers, and lack of food, and dysentery." Thousands of Iraqi children are dying every month from what amounts to simple diarrhea. Dr. Ryadh explains that even if they receive enough food, babies who develop chronic diarrhea are unable to absorb nutrients, and slowly starve to death as a result. Increasing food rations is not enough to stop the dying; safe drinking water must be restored as well.

The malnutrition wards at al-Mansour Pediatric Hospital in Baghdad are much the same as at Saddam Pediatric -- gloomy rooms filled with young children struggling to survive their first years of life. Wasting diseases such as marasmus and kwashiorkor, commonly found in countries suffering from famine, are now endemic in Iraq. Despite the best efforts of the United Nations' Oil-for-Food program, one out of every four Iraqi children remains severely or chronically malnourished, and, according to Dr. Mahmoud Mehi, the hospital director at

al-Mansour, waterborne diseases remain a primary cause of malnutrition.

"We are lacking enough sanitation, because of the insufficient chlorine, which is essential for the sterilization of drinking water. Many of the diseases are water-borne diseases, for example typhoid. . . . In this hospital -- and this is a teaching hospital, in the capitol -- we have a child die every day and sometimes two. Imagine what it is outside of the capitol, in the rural areas?" asks Dr. Mehi.

United Nations' reports confirm this harsh picture. According to a report presented by Kofi Annan to the Security Council on September 28th of this year, "[a]ccess to clean water is still far less than the demand, and sewage-flooded streets, caused by sewer blockages, have become a common phenomenon . . ." On November 19th, a second report released by Mr. Annan found that "despite the availability of drugs against amoebic dysentery, hydatidosis, toxoplasmosis, typhoid and visceral leishmaniasis, these diseases are not under control due to the poor state of water, environmental sanitation and related infrastructures." Both reports also repeatedly criticize the "unacceptably high level of holds" placed on humanitarian supplies in the UN Sanctions Committee. Although Iraq has sold \$50 billion worth of oil under Oil-for-Food, only some \$16 billion worth of supplies have made it into the country. At the same time, over \$4 billion in contracts remain on hold -- most of the holds having been placed by U.S. and UK members of the Committee.

Faris al-Asam, director-general for Planning and Monitoring for Baghdad's Water and Sewage Authority, complains bitterly about the holds. Says Mr. al-Asam, "This is one of the basic reasons why we have deficiency. When you start working on any positive move . . . you will find difficulties. Hundreds and hundreds of silly questions . . . you answer them, they give you more questions. It's like extending the time for infinity, for telling the people -- it's one way to tell us to forget about it."

Dr.'s Masri and Nagy won't forget about it. They are calling for an end to sanctions once and for all, and Dr. Nagy would like a truth commission to look into charges of genocide against Iraq. Unfortunately, they seem sadly out of touch with their fellow Americans as President Bush Jr. now steps up the rhetoric and grimly threatens Iraq with massive bombings and civil war. Back at Saddam Pediatric, Dr. Ryadh wonders what people in the United States are thinking when they support this call for increased military attacks against Iraq. "Why? Why? The Iraqi people are human beings, so why do they want to kill the Iraqi people?" asks Dr. Ryadh.

After 11 years of bombings and blockade, and hundreds of thousands of innocent dead, the question is why indeed.

Ramzi Kysia is a Muslim-American peace activist, and serves on the board of directors for the Education for Peace in Iraq Center (www.saveageneration.org). He is currently in Iraq as part of a Voices in the Wilderness (www.vitw.org) to help set-up the Iraq Peace Team www.iraqpeaceteam.org, an effort to place 100 American peaceworkers in Iraq prior to and during any future U.S. attack.