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Fact Sheet

Sanctions on Iraq

The United Nations (UN) issued sanctions against Iraq in 1990 as a response to Iraq's invasion of Kuwait. As a result, Iraq experienced a near total embargo and faced widespread starvation and death from preventable diseases. The Oil for Food Program [OFFP], rife with corruption, allowed the sale of Iraqi oil in exchange for food, much of it "unfit for human consumption."

While Iraq was forced out of Kuwait by the U.S.-led First Gulf War in 1991, the sanctions remained in place until 2003, weakening Iraq in preparation for another war, and causing massive human suffering in the process. This collective penalty inflicted on the people of Iraq violated the Fourth Geneva Convention.² The sanctions on Iraq are some of the most stringent and controversial sanctions in history.

Killing Half a Million Children

Infant mortality rates in Iraq doubled from 1990 to 2003. According to a World Health Organization report on Iraqi children in 2003, "Even before this



Photo by Jeremy L. Wood

conflict [Iraq War] began, the children of Iraq were suffering from the combined impact of poverty and international sanctions. One in eight Iraqi children dies before reaching the age of five, one in three is undernourished, one in four begins life as an underweight baby. The three biggest child killers are acute respiratory infection, diarrhoeal diseases and measles."³ The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) reports that 500,000 children under the age of 5 died due to sanctions. Then-U.S. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright famously said that she believed half a million young children killed by sanctions was "worth it."⁴

Impacts on Potable Water

UNICEF estimated that between 1990 and 2000, the average per capita share of potable water decreased from 330 liters to 150 liters in Baghdad, and from 180 liters to 65 liters in rural areas.⁵



Photo by TECH. SGT. JOE COLEMAN

During the First Gulf War (1990-1991), which coincided with the start of the sanctions, 90,000 tons of bombs were dropped on Iraq, destroying crucial

infrastructure such as power plants, water pumps, and sanitation systems. As a result, sewage flowed into the rivers and city streets, contaminating the drinking water supply.⁶ Due to sanctions, which restricted the import of necessary supplies, it was difficult for Iraq to repair this vital infrastructure.

Impacts on GDP

GDP per capita decreased by nearly 80% between 1989 and 1996, from \$2,304 per capita to \$507.⁷ Sanctions had a particularly devastating impact on Iraq's economy, which depended on trade for exporting oil and importing essential goods, like food. This economic impact was amplified for local Iraqi businesses, which had little to sell due to restrictions on imports. The U.S. and the UK were accused of putting unreasonable holds on infrastructure equipment purchased by the Iraqi government as well, effectively preventing economic recovery.⁸

Hero's Story

"Immediately prices doubled, tripled, and then skyrocketed unrealistically. For most of us the coping strategy was to use our savings; then, when they dried up, to sell whatever we could.

Imagine not having enough food on the table to satisfy you. We left the table hungry for two years continuously. A teacher in a vulnerable area said that, on average, three children a day were taken to the hospital due to malnutrition.

Due to sanctions, there were fewer choices of all types of medications. After the sanctions began, lack of food caused more health problems. Malnutrition became a new load on the hospital. The sanctions killed many Iraqi people, by starvation, malnutrition, exhaustion, and unavailable medicine."⁹ - Hero Anwar Brzw

Hero was born in 1971 in Kurdistan, Iraq. She is currently the Deputy Country Director for REACH (Rehabilitation, Education and Community Health) in Iraq.

Oil-For-Food Program [OFFP]

The terrible impact of sanctions was the catalyst for the Oil For Food Program [OFFP], which allowed Iraq to legally export oil in order to have the funds to purchase much-needed food and medicines.¹⁰ Instead of going to the Iraqi government, the funds were deposited in an escrow account controlled by BNP Paribas Bank. Iraq's President Saddam Hussein rejected OFFP from 1991-1995 as a violation of Iraq's sovereignty. He finally accepted it in 1996 due to the horrific conditions in the country.¹¹

The OFFP was rife with controversy. Over one-quarter of the funds were never spent on food or medicine, but were instead used for UN administrative costs or sent to Kuwait as war reparation payments. Additionally, the UN/U.S. imposed "dual usage" bans on items deemed as potential bomb-making materials. For example, Iraq was banned from purchasing pencils, due to the possible extraction and use of the lead.¹²

An investigative report by the UN-appointed Volcker panel, headed by U.S.

Federal Reserve Chairman Paul Volcker, uncovered \$5 million of undocumented contractor overpayments. The Volcker panel pointed to mismanagement of funds by the UN, as well as outright bribery and personal enrichment by private stakeholders.¹³ The Volcker panel revealed that Benon Sevan, the director of the OFFP, had received nearly \$150,000 in bribes from UN contractors from 1998 to 2002. UN Procurement Officer Alexander Yakovlev was arrested in 2005 and pled guilty to conspiracy, wire fraud, and money laundering after receiving almost \$1m in bribes from UN contractors involved in the OFFP.¹⁴

Conclusion

The UN placed sanctions on Iraq in 1990 in an attempt to thwart its invasion of Kuwait. Although Iraq did withdraw from Kuwait due to the First Gulf War, the U.S. and UK made it very clear that sanctions would stay in place until Iraqi President Saddam Hussein stepped down. When sanctions did not achieve that aim, U.S. President George W. Bush began a new war on Iraq in 2003 to instigate regime change.

Wielded as a political tool to force regime change in Iraq, the real impact of sanctions was felt by millions of innocent Iraqis, especially children.

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World BEYOND War is a global grassroots network of volunteers, activists, and allied organizations advocating for the abolition of war and its replacement with an alternative global security system based on peace and demilitarization. Visit WorldBEYONDWar.org to join the global movement to end all wars.

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