Iraqi Sanctions: Myth and Fact

On August 6, 1990, immediately prior to the "Persian Gulf War," the United Nations levied sanctions against Iraq in response to Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait. In the ensuing 11-year span, the sanctions have not changed, though the Iraqi landscape has undeniably been altered forever. Well over one million Iraqis are dead as a direct result of the sanctions, over half of them children, and over four million Iraqis have fled the country in hope of a better life. The economy is in shambles, disease and malnutrition are commonplace, and even potable drinking water has become rare. Yet throughout the devastating aftermath of the "Persian Gulf War" and the sanctions, Saddam Hussein maintains his position as dictator. The aim of this article is to debunk the most common myths surrounding the Iraqi sanctions whose existence is dependent upon them.

MYTH: "Sanctions are not intended to harm the people of Iraq" (U.S. State Department, March 2000).

FACT: Several United States Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA) documents clearly and thoroughly prove, in the words of one author, "beyond a doubt that, contrary to the Geneva Convention, the U.S. government intentionally used sanctions against Iraq to degrade the country's water supply after the Gulf War. The United States knew the cost that civilian Iraqis, mostly children, would pay, and it went ahead anyway" (The Progressive, August 2001).

One document entitled "Iraq Water Treatment Vulnerabilities," dated January 22, 1991, is quite straightforward in how sanctions will prevent Iraq from supplying clean water to its citizens. It explains Iraq's heavy dependence on the importation of specialized equipment and some chemicals to purify its water. Failing to secure these items (which is nearly impossible to do under the sanctions), the documents adds, will result in a shortage of drinking water and could "lead to increased incidences, if not epidemics, of disease" (U.S. Department of Defense, January 1991).

Other DIA documents confirm that the U.S. government was not only aware of the devastation of the sanctions, but was, in fact, monitoring their progress. The first in a lengthy series of documents entitled "Disease Information" is a document whose heading reads "Subject: Effects of Bombing on Disease Occurrence in Baghdad." The document states, "Increased incidence of diseases will be attributable to degradation of normal preventive medicine, waste disposal, water purification/distribution, electricity, and decreased ability to control disease outbreaks. Any urban area in Iraq that has received - infrastructure damage will have similar problems." The document then itemizes the likely disease outbreaks, noting which in particular will affect children (U.S. Department of Defense, January 1991).

"There is a logical breakdown here. No one with any credibility denies that Saddam Hussein is a menace-a mass murderer and a perpetual threat to peace and stability. But the punishment for his sins is being visited tragically and overwhelmingly on the innocent" (New York Times, February 1 1998).

A second DIA document, "Disease Outbreaks in Iraq" from February 21, 1991 writes, "Conditions are favorable for communicable disease outbreaks, particularly in major urban areas affected by coalition bombing." It continues, "Infectious disease prevalence in major Iraqi urban areas targeted by coalition bombing (Baghdad, Basrah) undoubtedly has increased since the beginning of Desert Storm." Similar to the preceding document, it explains the causes of
the disease outbreaks and itemizes them, again paying close attention to which will affect children (U.S. Department of Defense, February 1991).

The third document, written March 15, 1991 and entitled "Medical Problems in Iraq," states that diseases are far more common due to "poor sanitary conditions (contaminated water supplied and improper sewage disposal) resulting from the war." It then cites a UNICEF/WHO report that "the quantity of potable water is less than 5 percent of the original supply," that "there are no operational water and sewage treatment plants," and that diarrhea and respiratory infections are on the rise. Almost as a sidenote, it adds "Children particularly have been affected by these diseases" (U.S. Department of Defense, March 1991).

"As these documents illustrate, the United States knew sanctions had the capacity to devastate the water treatment system of Iraq. It knew what the consequences would be: increased outbreaks of disease and high rates of child mortality" (The Progressive, August 2001).

MYTH: "Thanks to the oil-for-food program, the people of Iraq, especially those in the north, are getting needed foods and medicines" (U.S. State Department, March 2000).

FACT: Former UN Humanitarian Coordinator in Iraq, Denis Halliday, oversaw the oil-for-food program and believes otherwise. "The OFF program as conceived is completely inadequate. It was designed in fact not to resolve the situation, but to prevent further deterioration of both mortality rates and malnutrition. It has failed to do that; at best it has just about sustained the situation. It’s grossly under-funded, and it has not even begun to address the needs, the dietary needs of the Iraqi people... And on top of that you have a medical sector which gobbles up the rest of the money to a great extent, so again we have not managed to provide the basic needs of the Iraqi people" (The Fire This Time, April 1999). Halliday resigned from his post in September 1998 in protest of the sanctions against Iraq. He had worked for the UN for 34 years.

MYTH: "Iraqi obstruction of the oil-for-food program, not United Nations sanctions, is the primary reason the Iraqi people are suffering " (U. S. State Department, March 2000).

FACT: The UN sanctions were levied against Iraq in August 1990 and the oil-for-food program began in December 1996. It is therefore impossible to attribute the suffering of the Iraqi people to the obstruction of a program, which did not exist until 6 years after the fact. As Halliday explained, the oil-for-food program was set up by the UN Security Council as a response to the humanitarian crisis in Iraq created by the impact of the sanctions. The creation of the program demonstrates that the suffering of the Iraqi people preceded any possible interference.

Oil-for-food program or not, the plight of the Iraqi people, especially that of children, has been unconscionable. Since the onset of the sanctions, almost one-quarter of all infants are born underweight and the same number is malnourished (UN Report, March 1999). The situation doesn't get any better as they get older either, as 32 percent of children under 5 are chronically malnourished, with the mortality rate increasing over 6-fold to be among the highest in the world (UNICEF, November 1997 and WHO, March 1996). Stemming mainly from hunger and disease, the result is the death of 4,500 children under the age of 5 per month (October 1996 UNICEF). That translates roughly to 150 children killed every day. In all, if pre-war trends in child mortality had continued through the 1990s, there would have been half a million fewer deaths of children under five in Iraq from 1991 to 1998 (August 1999 UNICEF).

MYTH: "Iraq is mismanaging the oil-for-food program, either deliberately or through incompetence" (U.S. State Department, March 2000).
FACT: The U.S. State Department claims that because there has been some improvement in the mortality rates in northern Iraq, where the UN controls distribution of food and medicine, this proves that Saddam Hussein is to blame for the crisis in southern and central Iraq. As Hans Van Sponeck, former UN Humanitarian Coordinator in Iraq, who took over after Halliday's resignation, has noted, the claim of mismanagement is simply not true (The Fire This Time, April 1999).

Since the bombing of the "Persian Gulf War" was concentrated in southern Iraq, the destruction of civilian infrastructure is most severe there. Yet the oil-for-food program provides no funding for the distribution of food and medicine in southern and central Iraq. Southern and central Iraq also receives far less support per capita from the international community than northern Iraq. Comprising 85 percent of the population, southern and central Iraq benefits from only 11 non-governmental organizations (NGOs) as opposed to the 34 NGOs which northern Iraq benefits from. Similarly, northern Iraq receives 22 percent more- per capita from the oil-for-food program and gets about 10 percent of UN-controlled assistance in currency, while the rest of the country receives only commodities (Education for Peace in Iraq Center).

MYTH: "Holds on inappropriate contracts help prevent the diversion of oil-for-food goods to further Saddam's personal interests " (U. S. State Department, March 2000).

FACT: Requests for desperately needed equipment routinely get held up in the Security Council for months at a time. The delays have gotten so bad that UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan and Office of the Iraq Program Director Benon Sevon have written letters decrying the excessive holds placed on items ordered under the program (Education for Peace in Iraq Center).

The holds that perpetuate the detrimental health impacts of the sanctions have gained the attention of one House member. In the summer of 2000, Representative Tony Hall of Ohio wrote a letter to then Secretary of State Madeline Albright "about the profound effects of the increasing deterioration of Iraq's water supply and sanitation systems on its children's health." Hall wrote, "Holds on contracts for the water and sanitation sector are a prime reason for the increases in sickness and death. Of the eighteen contracts, all but one hold was placed by the U.S. government. The contracts are for purification chemicals, chlorinators, chemical dosing pumps, water tankers, and other equipment... I urge you to weigh your decision against the disease and death that are the unavoidable result of not having safe drinking water and minimum levels of sanitation" (The Progressive, August 2001).

Unfortunately for the people of Iraq, the letter was addressed to Madeline Albright-the same person who stated that the deaths of over half a million children were "worth it."

Despite the minimal coverage by Congress, holds continue to expedite the process of destruction within Iraq. "Earlier this year [2001], U.S. diplomats blocked child vaccines for Iraq, including for diphtheria, typhoid, and tetanus. Over $3 billion worth of contracts remain on hold. To date, no hearings have been held" (Education for Peace in Iraq Center, August 2001).

MYTH: Saddam Hussein is hoarding both food and medical supplies from his people to evoke Western sympathy (U.S. State Department, March 2000).

FACT: Allegations of the "warehousing" of food and medicine were put to rest by former UN Humanitarian Coordinator in Iraq, Hans Van Sponeck; "It is not, I repeat not, and you can check this with my colleagues, a pre-meditated act of withholding medicines from those who should
have it. It is much, much, more complex than that." Sponeck explains that low worker pay, lack of transportation, poor facilities, and low funding are responsible for the breakdowns in inventory and distribution systems. The bureaucracy of the oil-for-food program, such as contract delays and holds, also plays a substantial role. Sponeck, like his predecessor, Denis Halliday, resigned from his post in February 2000 in protest of the sanctions. Also like Halliday, Sponeck had worked for the UN for over 30 years (The Fire This Time, April 1999).

Halliday concurs that contract delays, contract holds, and distribution problems account for the medical supplies problem. "[T]hose factors come together and you have a problem... I have no doubt in saying that there is no one person in the Ministry of Health or anywhere else in the Iraqi government who is deliberately trying to damage the health, or allowing children or others to die by deliberately not distributing medical supplies. That's just nonsense" (The Fire This Time, April 1999)

MYTH: "Saddam Hussein's repression of the Iraqi people has not stopped" and therefore "lifting sanctions would offer the Iraqi people no relief from neglect at the hands of their government" (U.S. State Department, March 2000).

FACT: According to the State Department, "Saddam continues to attack coalition aircraft enforcing the no-fly zones, which were established to prevent Saddam from attacking Kurdish and Shita civilians, in violation of UNSC Resolution 688 and 949" (U.S. State Department, March 2000).

The constant bombing of the "no-fly zones" in Iraq by the United States and Britain, however, is not authorized under any UN resolution. As Halliday comments, "The bombing of the 'No-Fly' zones, which don’t exist under any resolution of the Security Council, has continued and still continues despite [the crisis in] Yugoslavia. It's a very tragic way for the USA and the UK to operate. It's completely outside the Security Council. It's a unilateral action which shows total disregard for the other member states of the Security Council" (The Fire This Time, April 1999). The United States government puts forth an effort to appear UN-backed by using the terms "coalition" and "allies" though the "coalition" consists of only two countries: the U.S. and the UK, "allies" to one another.

The U.S. State Department claims that Iraqi authorities routinely practice extrajudicial, summary, or arbitrary executions throughout those parts of the country still under regime control. The total number of prisoners believed to have been executed since autumn 1997 exceeds 2,500" (U.S. State Department, March 2000). Former U.S. Marine and UN Weapons Inspector in Iraq Scott Ritter puts this number in context. "The concept of us trying to save the Iraqi people from Saddam Hussein is ludicrous. He is a brutal dictator. He may torture to death 1,800 people a year. That's terrible and unacceptable. But we kill 6,000 a month. Let's put that on a scale" (June 1999 FOR interview).

The State Department similarly claims that "In northern Iraq, the government is continuing its campaign of forcibly deporting Kurdish and Turkomen families to southern governorates. As a result of these forced deportations, approximately 900,000 citizens are internally displaced throughout Iraq" (U. S. State Department, March 2000). The State Department, however, fails to mention that over four million people-four times the amount of "internal displacements"-have been forced to flee Iraq in search of a better life due to the deplorable conditions of the country as a result of the sanctions (Reuters).

MYTH: Iraq "has not fully declared and destroyed its WMD [weapons of mass destruction/
programs" or complied with weapons inspections. Iraqi economic sanctions "prevent the Iraqi regime access to resources that it would use to reconstitute weapons of mass destruction" (U.S. State Department, March, 2000).

FACT: Interestingly enough, the State Department fails to address its role in helping Iraq develop its weapons programs. "...throughout the 1970s and 1980s, the government of Iraq, which was the government of the Baath party led by Saddam Hussein, was an ally of the United States. Iraq was a recipient of massive amounts of weapons of mass destruction, most notably biological weapons stocks" (May 1999 National Catholic Reporter).

Yet despite this omission of history, the State Department proclaims that "Saddam Hussein's priorities are clear" based mainly on seized shipments of baby milk, baby bottles, and baby powder leaving Iraq. It seems especially unusual to state that if Hussein had greater control of baby products, he would use them to rebuild his weapons programs, especially considering that the seized items were not even directly linked to Hussein.

The truth is that Iraq has been, by and large, disarmed. "Following the Gulf War, Iraq was forced into an unprecedented disarmament process and its military might has been considerably diminished by the work of UNSCOM. Chief Weapons Inspector Richard Butler said that 'if Iraqi disarmament were a 5-lap race, we would be three-quarters of the way around the fifth and final lap.' Iraq's neighbors have said that Iraq no longer poses any threat. Even an Israeli military analyst has said that Iraq's biological weapons program was over-hyped" (Education for Peace in Iraq Center).

As for UNSCOM inspections, the lack of success lies mainly with the United States government's hidden agenda. UNSCOM had eight years of virtually unrestricted inspections. Former UN Weapons Inspector Raymond Zilinskas stated that "95 percent of [UNSCOM's] work proceeds unhindered" ("PBS Newshour" with Jim Lehrer, February 1998). But contrary to the UN goal of weapons inspections, the United States government has sought to use the inspections as intelligence gathering missions. Halliday states, "[T]he difficulty with UNSCOM has been the inclusion of espionage, of spies, of various intelligence organizations which, under the UN auspices, is something that is appalling to all of us. Now as it happens, UNSCOM staff, including Butler, are not staff members of the organization. They are hired from other organizations, but nevertheless we expect them to behave in a manner consistent of a civil servant, and that clearly was not done. And the CIA and others have owned up to what they did, in fact, that they used the UN as a cover for espionage, which is a very unfortunate thing and what, of course, the Iraqis had been saying for many years and the UN had denied for many years. They were right; we, obviously, were wrong" (The Fire This Time, April 1999).

Further evidence of this comes directly from former UN Weapons Inspector, Scott Ritter. "Fingers point at the United States primarily in using the weapons inspection process not so much as a vehicle for disarming Iraq, but rather as a vehicle for containing Saddam and for gathering information that could be used to remove Saddam. The US perverted the system; not the weapons inspectors" (June 1999 FOR interview). Ritter resigned from UNSCOM because of this perversion.

MYTH: "Saddam retains the capability to inflict significant damage upon Iraq's neighbors and its own civilian population" and "Without sanctions, Saddam would be free to use his resources to rearm and make good on his threats against Kuwait and the region" (U.S. State Department, March 2000).
FACT: Raymond Zilinskas, UN Weapons Inspector in Iraq, states "Although it has been theoretically possible for the Iraqis to regain such weapons since 1991, the duplicity would have been risky and expensive, and the probability of discovery very high" (Chicago Tribune, February 1998). Scott Ritter, however, is more blunt. "When you ask the question, 'Does Iraq possess militarily viable biological or chemical weapons?' the answer is a resounding 'NO.' 'Can Iraq produce today chemical weapons on a meaningful scale?' 'NO!' It is 'no' across the board. So from a qualitative standpoint, Iraq has been disarmed. Iraq today possesses no meaningful weapons of mass destruction capability" (June 1999 FOR interview).

MYTH: The United Nations levied the sanctions against Iraq, so the United States is not to blame.

FACT: Van Sponeck addresses this point head on. "The UN doesn't impose sanctions. It's the UN Security Council member governments who come together and impose sanctions... I don't see the distinction between US sanctions, in broad terms, and what is done and coming out of the Security Council of the UN. The leader in the discussion for the sanctions is the US side and they are the ones, together with the British, that have devised many of the special provisions that govern the implementation of the 986 [oil-for-food] program. They are coming together, in that Security Council of 15 nations and work as a team, and that's the outcome, but I don't see a separate US sanction regime that is markedly different from the UN Security Council regime" (The Fire This Time, April 1999).

August 6 of this year marked 11 years of malnutrition, 132 months of disease, and 4,017 days of undrinkable water. Every few hours another child dies—a child who knew nothing of the "Persian Gulf War," nothing of the oil-for-food program, and nothing of weapons inspections. The child only knew that she wanted to live. How many more parents must weep at their fallen children before we realize what we have done?