

EIRFeature

Save Iraq's children from George Bush

by Muriel Mirak-Weissbach

A Romanian airliner BAC 1-11 touched down at Frankfurt Airport on July 30, with a most unusual passenger load: 30 Greek soldiers, en route to the Gulf via Geneva for duty as U.N. guards, and 22 Iraqi children, victims of the war, brought to Germany for medical treatment which, because of the embargo, is not currently available in their own country. For the children, ranging between 2 and 19 years of age, the trip to Germany represents perhaps the only hope for recovery and return to a relatively normal life.

The story of the mini-airlift begins back at Easter, when the Schiller Institute, alarmed at reports indicating an imminent civilian catastrophe in war-torn Iraq, issued a call for the creation of a Committee to Save the Children in Iraq. The Vienna-based International Progress Organization (IPO) and the Patriarchate of the Chaldean Church in Babylon responded immediately to the call, along with hundreds of private citizens and relief organizations. Offers of medicines, hospital supplies, and food came into the German office of the committee, which could accept them only once the central problem of transportation had been solved. Due to the embargo, relief goods for Iraq have had to travel by plane to Amman, Jordan, and thence, along the land route across the desert to Baghdad, or other destinations. Time and costs are two factors making this route difficult.

In May, following a Bonn press conference which announced the committee's formation and plan of action, Prof. Hans Koechler of the IPO presented the problem to Austrian President Dr. Kurt Waldheim, and it was quickly solved. Dr. Waldheim approached Prince Sadruddin Aga Khan, Executive Delegate of the Secretary General for a U.N. Inter-Agency Humanitarian Program. Through the courtesy of Prince Aga Khan's office, an Aeroflot Ilyushin 76TD was chartered, and flew direct from Frankfurt to Habbaniya Airport outside Baghdad on July 7, with 20 tons of medicines, food, and medical equipment.

When the committee was apprised of the fact that both the Iraqi and the German authorities would agree to send war-wounded children to Germany for medical



The inaugural press conference of the Committee to Save the Children in Iraq, in Bonn on May 15, 1991. Members of the committee include, from right: Helga Zepp-LaRouche, Schiller Institute; Dr. Margit Fakhoury, a German pediatrician; Philip Najim, a representative of the Patriarch of the Chaldean Church; Muriel Mirak-Weissbach.

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treatment, again the transportation problem loomed large as an obstacle: It would be impossible to transport severely injured children over the long, hot land route to Amman, often taking 16 hours. Again, the Executive Delegate's office agreed to lend a helping hand, arranging for chartered passenger planes, used for U.N. troop transport, to bring the children to Frankfurt on their return flights to Europe. Thus, a first group of eight children arrived on July 9, and were placed in various German clinics, through a program organized by the "Hammer-forum," a group of doctors in the Ruhr region.

When the Taron BAC 1-11 landed on July 30, a fleet of Maltese ambulances was waiting for them. As the photographers and journalists gathered on the runway were quick to realize, these children present the living proof that the stories of a "clean" war consisting of "surgical strikes" against exclusively "military targets" were simple lies. Three of the children are survivors of the Amariya civilian bunker bombing, which left an estimated 1,400 dead. One 16-year-old boy, whose sister and other relatives perished, managed to drag three other children to safety. He suffered severe burns on his back and hand, requiring surgery. Another, 19 years old, lost both legs in a bomb blast which destroyed a civilian bomb shelter located under an administrative building in Baghdad. Another child, from Najaf, lost a leg during the civil war which raged there, and shrapnel is still lodged in his body. The most serious case is that of a 13-year-old who suffered multiple bomb injuries in Kerbala, also the

scene of war between the Iraqi military and the Iranian-backed Shiites. One leg was amputated under war conditions, the other is contracted, and shrapnel remains to be removed.

The press gathered to greet the plane was duly shocked at what they saw, and coverage in the major German media the following days—the anniversary of the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait—brought the plight of these innocent victims into the homes and consciousness of millions of citizens. Although various studies had been reported in the press, from the Harvard Study Team in May, and from the U.N. Executive Delegate's task force in July, the raw statistics elaborated therein could not adequately communicate the nature of the tragedy which has gripped Iraq. When one reads of 170,000 children who will die by year's end, unless the embargo is lifted to allow in food and medicine, one is struck by the number. But when one sees the individual child rolled off the plane on a stretcher, with amputated limbs and gaping wounds, one realizes that those terrible numbers correspond to specific, individual human beings, each sacred.

The mini-airlift which the committee has participated in organizing, has broken the embargo in a certain sense, with its direct flights and its transportation of the children, as one German newspaper pointed out. In a broader sense, it has contributed to breaking the "embargo on truth" which had been instituted with the war censorship. It is only when these embargos are lifted in full, that the millions of children now endangered in Iraq will have the chance to live.