

Iraq: a glimpse of a people under siege

Muriel Mirak-Weissbach of the Committee to Save the Children in Iraq reports on her recent visit to Baghdad.

Baghdad, one year after the "end" of the Gulf war, stands defiant. Not only are buildings that had been reduced to steel skeletons by the bombing raids, reappearing full-bodied and whole, but construction has begun on brand-new sites. From the upper floors of the Rasheed Hotel, one sees a monumental marble white edifice, which is nearing completion; smaller buildings are everywhere in various stages of construction: stores, houses, schools, and the like. A myriad of cranes are silhouetted against the sky, as work to rebuild goes on even in the dead hours of the night. The huge congress center, an enormous building across from the Rasheed, completed just prior to the war, is also the subject of intensive repair work, to replace the roof which a bomb had blown off.

The effort, which has mobilized significant numbers of otherwise idled labor, has been undertaken by the Iraqi government in full awareness of the psychological effect it has in remoralizing a population subjected to hardships long after the bombs stopped falling. And it has worked; people, though not hiding the strains of the continuing blockade, will point proudly to such construction sites to demonstrate that the nation has not been defeated.

Indeed, if the official war ended a year ago, the war of nerves continues, gaining in intensity. The country and its people are being subjected still to a barrage of attacks, though not mounted from buzzing aircraft. First and most obvious is the continuing blockade, which has held the country incommunicado from the rest of the world for over 19 months. This means all normal trade has been cut off, and, despite protestations to the contrary, even medical and food supplies cannot get through. The reason, simply stated, is that since no oil can be sold, no oil revenues come in, with which to finance food and medical purchases. The result is visible in rising infant mortality rates and decreasing living standards. Food items are crossed off menus, and what is available on the open market is priced out of reach of all but the very wealthy. To further exacerbate runaway inflation, Iraq's enemies have intensified currency warfare, by introducing counterfeit bills into the country, reportedly from Israel.

Government initiatives

In response, the government has undertaken several initiatives. People who receive forged currency and take it to

a bank, are reimbursed with genuine bills. This has the effect of taking the phony money out of circulation and preventing panic among a population struggling to scrape together funds to survive. To put a halt to inflation, the government intervened in late March, calling on vendors to publish their inventories. This had the desired effect of ending speculation regarding supply, and therefore, bringing prices on the free market down very dramatically. In some cases, prices for basic food items dropped by 50% or more within days.

At the same time, a stock market was opened in Baghdad, with the aim of attracting domestic capital into investments in native industry. These measures, coupled with the announcement that negotiations with the United Nations over oil sales would resume, brought a ray of optimism into an otherwise somber atmosphere. One reflection of the improved mood was to be seen in lessened speculative pressure on the Iraqi dinar on the black market. Whereas a dollar had brought as much as 12 dinars previously, after these measures were introduced, the U.S. currency would trade at 8.5 dinars.

One particularly vicious aspect of the embargo has been its effect on the country's airline, which has been grounded since the war broke out in January 1991. As Iraqi Airways Director General Saffi pointed out in an interview, airplanes are like living organisms, in that they require activity in order to survive. Sitting idled in locations outside of Iraq, like Amman, Jordan, these aircraft are subject to deterioration. For a plane to be usable, each of its hundreds of thousands of parts must be dismantled, examined, tested, and replaced. Otherwise, it is a matter of time before all the aircraft will be useless. Meanwhile, since air travel has been banned, except for limited flights between Baghdad and Basra, the sole route in and out of the country, the Baghdad-Amman highway, has become a death trap, with rising rates of automobile accidents.

Financial warfare has failed

If financial warfare and the blockade on trade have aimed at killing the country's economy, they have so far failed. Ironically, a country which had been dependent for 70% of its food on imports, is now discovering the ability to vastly expand domestic agricultural production, albeit with limits



Iraqi children are welcomed at Dulles hospital on their way to the Children's Hospital of Richmond, Virginia, where they were brought on April 2 for treatment, by the Committee to Save the Children in Iraq. The children are suffering from wounds incurred during the Gulf war.

Michael Weissbach and Muriel Mirak-Weissbach, representing the Committee to Save the Children in Iraq, prior to a trip to Baghdad in 1991.

imposed by the embargo on such items as fertilizer and insecticides. More fundamentally, if the goal of the embargo has been to force the population to its knees, this has failed utterly. Anyone who doubted the Iraqis' ability to survive has been proven wrong in the interim. As one high-ranking politician put it, "Capitulate? That doesn't even enter into the realm of possibilities. If need be, we'll go back to living in the desert. We won't give up."

The war of nerves is being conducted on a political and military plane, as well as economically. Reports appear daily in the media of threats of renewed use of military force, issued from London or Washington, if Iraq does not comply with whatever demands the U.N. is making that day. The fact that Libya has been added to the list of targets of the new world order has only confirmed suspicions that military action against the Arab world may indeed be revived. And, forces associated with the wartime anti-Iraq coalition are continuously engaged in seeking to foment subversive actions, whether from "opposition" groups among the Kurds, or from abroad. The most blatant indications of foreign attempts on Iraq's integrity came in the form of bona fide military incursions: Turkey has been regularly conducting aerial attacks against alleged PKK (Kurdish People's Party) terrorist positions well inside Iraqi territory, while Iran entered Iraqi airspace to bomb what it said were Mujaheddin camps in the south.

With such events daily fare, it is no wonder that the Iraqis consider anything possible. They are prepared for virtually



anything: invasions, aerial bombings, coup attempts, or whatever else might enter the scenario-spinners' heads in London or Washington think tanks. The only alternative that does not enter into the repertoire of possible developments is capitulation.