

Editorial

End the embargo of Iraq!

At his weekly audience on April 15, Pope John Paul II issued an appeal to the leaders of the international community: Stop the suffering in Iraq! The pontiff made clear that this should be done by stopping the causes of that suffering, the United Nations-run embargo against that defeated nation. It is our hope that this action will mobilize a broad array of moral and political forces in this world, to finally end this barbaric policy.

There have been many studies on the destruction which is being wreaked by the continued imposition of the embargo on Iraq, all of which are coherent with one another. They uniformly tell the story that, while much repair has been done to the shattered infrastructure system, there is a woeful lack of medicine, food, and other prerequisites for medical care. As a result, huge numbers of children are dying.

The current Vatican call comes as a result of two new cries for help. First, was a visit to Europe by the Patriarch of the Chaldean Church in Iraq, Rafael Bidawid, last month. The patriarch and his spokesmen have consistently argued that there is no way in which humanitarian aid alone can relieve the suffering in Iraq, but that the sanctions must be lifted. But, on this trip, he added the charge, in an interview on Vatican radio, that what is being done to the 18 million people of Iraq can only be described as genocide. After the patriarch's visit, Pope John Paul sent a fact-finding mission to Iraq to report back to him. That group returned to give an accounting on April 12. They told the pope that there is no basic medicine in Iraq, nor food for infants, and said that the Holy See should continue to send humanitarian aid, "at least what is needed for the children."

The pope, however, went further in his request. He stressed that the peoples of Iraq, and of the Christian community, are "expressing their gratitude to everybody, whether it be persons or institutions, who are working to end their suffering, but are imploring that there be a stop, as soon as possible, to the causes of their suffering."

In the United States, at the very least, there has been a virtual blackout on the plight of the majority of

Iraqis. U.N. Ambassador Thomas Pickering, who has rammed these measures through the United Nations and insisted upon their maintenance, has argued in the national media that the Iraqis have just as much medicine as they had before the war! This is quite a testament to his arrogance, since it is well known that the U.N. is now preventing production of medicines, on the basis of their "dual use" qualities—i.e., their potential to be used for military purposes.

Yet there is no question but that both hunger and illness are rampant in the country that was once the most prosperous and fast-growing in the Arab world. A U.N. exemption for food and medicine does not provide the monies to import these much-needed goods. And the U.N. will not release the monies to permit their purchase.

Those who say that the supplies are available and are just being sequestered by the army, are being "absurd," in the words of one recent visitor. Even outside agencies, which are hardly trustful of Saddam Hussein, have testified to the egalitarian nature of the food distribution system in the country.

In fact, what is going on in Iraq is what Malaysia's Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad alluded to last fall during his speech at the United Nations. The embargo is a modern-day medieval siege, in which a helpless population is cut off and starved into submission. What enrages the authors of this inhuman tactic, is simply that the Iraqis refuse to bow their heads, despite the viciousness with which the embargo is being applied.

It is time that the world community realized that it is destroying its own humanity, as well as that of Iraq. The values of a humane civilization, not to mention respect for national sovereignty, were being ripped to shreds by the application of the principle that "might makes right." Pockets of resistance have been maintained in the Arab world, Europe, and the U.S., including some noble efforts of American farmers to share American milk powder with Iraqi children. But now, with the pope's call, we must settle for nothing less than the embargo to be dropped.