

The impact of a US war on Iraq's civilian infrastructure

By Terry Cook
4 November 2002

A series of factual studies, reports and comments on the state of Iraq's infrastructure demonstrate the completely one-sided character of the war being prepared by the Bush administration, with all the resources of the world's most powerful military machine. This material paints a picture of a small, impoverished nation whose basic civilian services, already badly compromised, would quickly break down during a US military assault.

Iraq's power, communications, water, sewage treatment and health facilities have not been allowed to recover from the extensive damage inflicted in the 1991 US-led Gulf War. Years of stringent UN sanctions have severely limited reconstruction, leaving the country's services in such a state that they would disintegrate within days in the event of a US military strike, with serious consequences for the population.

Reporting from Baghdad last month, *Boston Globe* correspondent Anthony Shadid, warned that the first days of US air attacks would, "devastate its [Iraq's] tattered and already overwhelmed infrastructure, severing power to hospitals and water treatment plants, cutting off drinking water to millions in Baghdad and possibly elsewhere, and pouring raw sewage into the street within hours". UN reports showed that even without further attacks, the country's basic services stood "on the brink of collapse, a result of 12 years of UN sanctions".

Shadid's estimate is supported by a report published by the Global Policy Forum in August 2001. It states: "Civilian infrastructure has suffered disproportionately from the lack of maintenance and investment. For example, Iraq's electrical sector is barely holding production steady at one-third of its 1990 capacity even though government expenditure in the sector consistently exceeds plans. Electrical shortages, worst

during the hot summers, spoil food and medicine and stop water purification, sewage treatment and irrigated agriculture, interfering with all aspects of life."

In the event of war, the breakdown of power supplies to hospitals, together with the shortage of medical equipment, medicines and drugs resulting from sanctions, would make it impossible for Iraq to treat, let alone contain, cholera, typhoid, dysentery and other diseases associated with contaminated water and untreated sewage.

According to one veteran UN aid official in Baghdad, 11 years of deprivation caused by the 1991 war and UN sanctions have seriously undermined the general health of people and their ability to ward off sickness. "People will be far more vulnerable to future attack than before; they are weaker, and they have little resistance," he said. "It (war) is going to be horrendous for lots and lots of people."

Moreover, the horrific injuries caused by US bombing would go substantially untreated. UN sanctions have prohibited the import of medical equipment such as x-ray machines, incubators, and heart and lung machines, together with vaccines, analgesics and chemotherapy drugs that the UN Security Council claims could be converted into chemical and biological weapons. Another drug on the UN proscribed list is morphine, one of the most effective painkillers, meaning that thousands of injured will endure terrible pain.

The newspaper *Salaam* reported last month that Iraq's 130 remaining hospitals, built in the 1960s and 1980s, are in an advanced state of disrepair with cracked and broken windows, damaged doors and leaking roofs. The hospitals' aging sewerage and ventilation systems are prone to breakdown because of lack of maintenance and parts. The country's system of

primary health centres, comprised of a thousand dispensaries, is struggling to operate. Many clinics lack basic requirements such as stethoscopes and sterilising equipment and pharmaceuticals.

Once US hostilities begin, the population will be hit by severe food shortages as sanctions are tightened. The UN program allowing the sale of oil, with part of the revenue going toward the purchase of food, will be automatically terminated. Limited internal food resources exist because a significant proportion of Iraq's agricultural resources, including farms, machinery and irrigation systems, were destroyed in 1991.

UN agencies in Iraq are drawing up contingency plans to prepare for the impending catastrophe. According to media reports, the Red Cross is stockpiling medical supplies, tents and water filtration units in Iraq, Iran and Jordan. Such emergency measures will be woefully inadequate. Under conditions of war and siege, with roads, bridges and airstrips disabled, it will be nigh impossible to distribute aid.

There is evidence that crippling of Iraq's infrastructure has been deliberate and central to a long-term US perspective to assert dominance over the country. Not only has the US government sought to cause the maximum amount of damage in order to undermine the capacity of the Iraq people to resist, it has aimed to incite popular discontent, hoping to fuel a rebellion against the Saddam Hussein regime.

Barton Gellman, a staff writer for the *Washington Post*, writing soon after the 1991 conflict, observed that: "Some targets, especially later in the war, were bombed primarily to create postwar leverage over Iraq, not to influence the course of the conflict itself." Gellman quoted Colonel John A Warden, deputy director of Air Force strategy, doctrine and plans: "One purpose of destroying Iraq's electrical grid was that you have imposed a long-term problem on the leadership that it has to deal with sometime." Gellman added: "It gives us long-term leverage."

Former UN humanitarian coordinator for Iraq, Denis Halliday, who resigned from the position in disgust in 1998, contends that epidemics of cholera, dysentery and hepatitis that have plagued Iraq since the 1991 Gulf War were the direct result of the US deliberately targeting Iraq's infrastructure. He cites a recently

released declassified US Defense Intelligence Agency document from the start of the conflict, pointing out Iraq's vulnerable water situation. The document predicted that the shortage of pure drinking water resulting from the bombing of infrastructure could "lead to increased incidences, if not epidemics, of disease".

"I think there's no doubt whatsoever that the Americans had worked out the vulnerability of Iraq in terms of clean fresh water," Halliday said. "So they set about destroying electrical power capacity, which is essential, of course, for the treatment and distribution of water."

Halliday estimated that by 1999 the destruction of Iraq's infrastructure and UN sanctions had directly caused the deaths of 600,000 children and 500,000 adults through malnutrition and disease. Tens of thousands more people, military and civilian, were killed in the US-led military assault. What will be the cost in human suffering of Washington's next criminal venture in the Gulf?

To contact the WSWWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

<http://www.wsws.org>