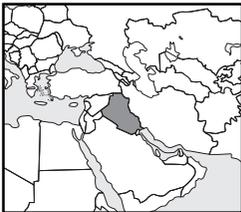


## Few hopes

LABID ABBAWI<sup>1</sup>



Iraq is regressing in all areas of human and social development. The unjust international sanctions imposed on Iraq since 1991 and the irresponsible, inhumane and undemocratic policies of a corrupt regime are the causes of this grim situation.

The current impasse in human development threatens the future of the country and the prosperity of its people. It is futile to talk about progress and development in today's Iraq without first unshackling the individual citizen from fear, deprivation and humiliation. A meaningful policy of human and social development requires adopting a strategy of combating and eradicating poverty, introducing democratic principles of freedom and human rights, and cooperating with the independent institutions of civil societies in the planning and the implementation process. Real equality for women in society and political life is also imperative for genuine development.

It is widely accepted that decent living conditions, enough food, clean water, proper medical care, primary education and affordable housing are vital elements in measuring social development of any country.

Iraq is regressing in all these areas, and no positive trends towards meaningful policies of human and social development can be seen. The unjust international sanctions imposed on Iraq since 1991 and the irresponsible, inhumane and undemocratic policies of a corrupt regime are the causes of this grim situation.

Iraq's economy depends largely on the export of oil. The international sanctions limits its freedom of trade; exports and imports are monitored by the UN Sanctions Committee and oil revenues are supervised by a UN-sponsored French bank. The fluctuation of oil prices, the delays in releasing trade contracts by the Sanctions Committee, and the apparent reluctance of the government to contract essential supplies have all been detrimental to the economic and social state of the country and have hurt the government's ability to embark on paths of social development.

The government's unwillingness to improve the living conditions of the people has a political purpose: by maintaining a low standard of living and continuously imposing stringent economic and financial measures on the people, the government puts the entire blame for the country's woes on the economic sanctions and frees itself from any responsibility.

According to a statement by the Minister of External Trade to an Iraqi magazine on 5 December 2001, Iraq's revenue since the end of 1996 from the Security Council Resolution 986 (better known as the "Food for Oil Resolution") was about USD 48.5 billion. Only USD 15 billion of that was spent on food, medicine and other commodities. The UN extracted USD 18.5 billion to pay for

their staff in Iraq and for compensations to others. Contracts worth USD 6 billion were suspended. The remaining USD 9 billion, which the trade minister did not mention, and which the government could have used for humanitarian commodities and badly needed social services, was frozen in the bank.

According to various sources, Iraq's revenue from oil smuggled to neighbouring countries in 2001 amounted to about USD 2 billion. This money was not invested in development, but rather allocated to the special security forces and the Republican Army (the elite force of the regime) and distributed to the families of the rulers and their aides.

### Unemployment, inequality and poverty

Official reports at the end of 2000 estimated that 80% of the private sector factories are closed for lack of money and raw materials. No improvement of this situation was reported throughout 2001.

According to a UNDP report, about 50% of the labour force is unemployed. Tens of thousands of workers are forced to look for jobs in the non-manufacturing sectors of the economy. The public sector fares no better; many trained and skilled workers are forced out of work, and the majority of them remains unemployed without immediate prospects. The government has no plans to retrain them or absorb them into other sectors.

The cost of many consumer commodities and necessary social services rose in 2001 while the rate of exchange of the local currency dropped by about 1.5% compared with the beginning of 2000. These factors and the continued high rate of inflation have contributed to the further deterioration of the living standard of the majority of Iraqi people.

The Iraqi government's statistics revealed that the average person's income per year reached a peak of USD 4,083 in 1980, fell to USD 3,508 in 1990, and rapidly deteriorated to USD 761 in 1993 and USD 715 in 2000.

Today about 80% of the population are living below the poverty line (less than USD 2 per day earnings) according to an official statement published in the Iraqi newspapers in 2001. This has grown from 45% in 1990-1991.

With the continued lapse into impoverishment last year and the lack of a poverty reduction strategy, economic growth is unlikely to happen in the near future unless sanctions are lifted immediately and the government takes drastic measures.

<sup>1</sup> For the last decade, the Iraqi government has declined to issue official statistics about social and human development indicators. This makes our work very difficult, especially with reference to social development commitments.

Unequal distribution of income, social inequality and favouritism are common characteristics of the present Iraqi society. The middle class is dwindling as poverty increases. Less than 5% of the population is protected by the regime and therefore enjoys such privileges as imported consumer products and luxury goods.

There is also a disparity in the level of people's income between the North (Iraqi Kurdistan, which was liberated and outside the control of the central rule) and the southern counties, which are badly discriminated against for political and sectarian reasons. Only the capital and one county in the midland (the birth place of the president and home of the majority of the elite and rich) get special government attention, especially with respect to utility services (electricity, clean water, transportation and the like.)

In Iraqi Kurdistan, with 3.5 million inhabitants, people enjoy the benefit of the money allocated to the region (13% of the oil revenue appropriated through Security Council Resolution 986) and a reasonably just distribution of food and medicine under the supervision of UN personnel, in contrast to corrupt government officials in the rest of the country. Hence the level of social services, medical care and education is better, and so are the standard of living and the purchasing power of the population. The rate of exchange of the Iraqi Dinar (IQD) is IQD 18 to the dollar in Kurdistan and IQD 2,050-2,080 to the dollar in the rest of the country.

### **No improvements in the women's situation**

The situation of women did not improve in 2000/2001. There are no serious efforts to reverse the trends in inequality in earnings compared with men holding identical employment, social deprivation and discrimination in social and political life. Because of higher unemployment in manufacturing, more women in the sectors of education, health, and municipal and local administration are forced out of jobs to give way to displaced male workers.

### **Social disintegration, youth dilemma**

A main challenge facing Iraqi society is the worsening conditions among children and young people. There is a high level of mortality of infants and children under five, currently 108 deaths for every 1,000 births in the middle and southern regions and 95 per 1,000 in the rest of the country. According to Ministry of Health reports on 15 December 2001, in the three months from September to November 2001 there were 31,000 deaths; among them were 21,000 children below five years of age. The spread of chronic diseases is on the rise. There are more child labourers and more children living and begging in the streets. This raises the level of corruption, crimes and moral degradation.

The young population suffers from high unemployment and lack of realistic opportunities, which cause thousands to emigrate abroad. The UN estimates that there are 4.5 million Iraqis living outside Iraq, a fourfold increase over the last decade.

Young people are refraining from marriage, the divorce rate is increasing, and crime and juvenile delinquency are common. These and the daily fear from repression and intimidation by security forces have led to a disintegration of the fabric of the society, especially among the young, hindering human development and constituting a dark prospect for the future of the country for decades to come.

### **Health and education, major obstacles**

The state of health and education in the country has stabilised in recent years with the help of a huge sum of money allocated to both sectors through the UN (Resolution 986). But citizens, especially the poor, have limited access to these services, especially since the abolition of free education and health care three years ago.

Students have to pay for enrolment, textbooks and instruction. In addition, new measures were introduced last year that put further burdens on students. They have to pay a USD 2.5 transfer fee to change schools, and a USD 12.5 registration fee for every year of study. Thousands of students are forced to leave schools and colleges for economic reasons, overburdening the already saturated job market. In 2001, 67,000 teachers left their jobs because of economic pressure, according to the report of the Ministry of Higher Education.

The health care situation is also suffering, especially because of the privatisation of medical centres and the shortage of medical supplies in hospitals and clinics. Much of the medicine supplied by the UN does not find its way to hospitals but is sold in the black market or exported to neighbouring countries.

The World Health Organisation (WHO) reported on 26 July 2001 that 80,000 children under five years of age suffered from chronic malnutrition, and the cases of anaemia, rickets and pneumonia have increased by 10%. The Ministry of Health's reports in 2001 indicated that cases related to various cancers had increased in the last ten years by four times. One-third of children infected by cancer died, while birth deformations caused by cancer increased from 1.08% to 3.8% of newborns.

According to the UNDP's Human Development Report published in 2001, life expectancy in Iraq was 60.5 years in 1999, compared with 66 years in the rest of the Arab world. This is eight years below what had been predicted in 1985. WHO attributes this decrease in life expectancy to the degradation of the infrastructure in health services and the low rate of spending on health needs, which is estimated at about USD 110 a year *per capita*. UNICEF expects a further decrease in life expectancy and a continued increase in birth mortality unless drastic actions are taken to improve the health situation.

This bleak situation of human suffering will continue if the current policies of the Iraqi regime prevail. Maintaining a strong grip on power through repressive means has been the government's priority. Authorities have denied the urgency of social development and largely ignored the problems of poverty, unemployment and social disintegration. The economic policies and measures that are implemented are strongly controlled and directed by the central bodies to serve the interests of the ruling class and are incompatible with the concept of human needs and sustained social development. ■

Iraqi Al-Amal Association  
<alamal.co@mail.sy>