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In Baghdad, the babies are dying: there's no anaesthetic, no antibiotics, no clean water, and sometimes no breast milk

3 May 1999

On 26 March the New Statesman published a letter by Derek Fatchett, the Foreign Office minister, objecting to my suggestion that the enforced suffering of the people of Iraq by the US and British governments was a crime comparable with those of General Pinochet or General Suharto or Henry Kissinger.

They, too, killed at a distance. Pinochet's victims may have been around the corner and Kissinger's across an ocean, but the effect on their victims was the same.

Clinton's and Blair's victims in Iraq have never quite caught the media's imagination. That is because they are politically unworthy victims, unlike, say, the Kosovar refugees. While Blair has pronounced himself a crusader for civilisation in the Balkans (in a photo-opportunity with an RAF fighter bomber), his response to the greater human tragedy in Iraq has been silence.

Jane Howarth recently described this tragedy. She is one of a band of extraordinary people, true internationalists, who have braved the hazardous journey across the desert from Jordan in order to deliver medical supplies. "You walk through the hospitals," she said, "and meet the dedicated doctors who are angry and frustrated because they can't do anything to alleviate the pain."

She saw operations performed without anaesthetic; as with analgesics and antibiotics, there is none. "This doctor pointed out to me children they call sugar babies," she said. "Their mothers can't obtain infant formula and can't breast-feed their babies because they've got no milk. They feed them sugar dissolved in water, and the babies get distended bodies."

There is no clean water any more; broken-down sewage plants empty into the Tigris, where people are forced to drink. The under-fives now dying at a rate of 4,000 a month (as a consequence of the economic sanctions, according to Unicef) die mostly from preventable diseases, like diarrhoea and gastroenteritis.

The sanctions, UN authorised but imposed by Washington and Whitehall, include a ban on baby food, bandages, stethoscopes, school books, toys and shrouds for the dead. Jane Howarth says the oil-for-food deal, which is supposed to allow some humanitarian supplies from the proceeds of limited oil sales, is a sham. "Because the infrastructure is so damaged and the bombing goes on," she said, "Iraq isn't able to pump enough oil even to match the amount it is allowed to sell. There is what is known as the 661 Committee that oversees oil-for-food, and I have watched the deliberate delays. I have known antibiotics to be held up for so long they passed their use-by dates. It took three years to have a ban on contraceptives lifted. There are no mammograms because X-ray film is banned, and pap smears are out of the question."

One of the Americans who dominate the committee told the Washington Post: "The longer we can fool around in the committee and keep things static, the better."

Following my report (19 March) about similar conditions, Derek Fatchett, who covers for Robin Cook, wrote us a long, facetious letter, though an important one - important because it provides a telling example of the double standards that have generated such public cynicism about mainstream politics, especially "new" Labour. None of the facts of the suffering in Iraq is addressed by Fatchett. Apart from an aside that he needs "no reminding about weeping for the deaths of infants", he has nothing to say about his government's documented culpability in the deaths, every month, of the 4,000 infants mentioned above. Dennis Halliday has put the monthly death rate of children of all ages at 6,000. This, he cautions, is a conservative estimate. Halliday is a former UN assistant secretary general, who resigned as humanitarian co-ordinator for Iraq "because I did not join the UN to wage war on children".

Halliday's facts are verified by his former colleagues in Baghdad and by the World Health Organisation, which has put the total figure of child deaths at more than half a million. Fatchett has nothing to say about this, other than an unsubstantiated slur that I "massage a few figures and shade away some facts". John Simpson was the recipient of a similar "new" Labour smear for his reporting from Belgrade. It is craven behaviour that tells us that the political class is not at all confident about its violent actions.

Fatchett's claim that humanitarian supplies are wilfully held up by the regime is not supported by foreign observers. Mahomed Mohamud, the Tunisian UN planning officer in Baghdad, says the problems are related to the collapsed infrastructure: the lack of power, refrigeration, telephones and transport. "I have not had a single complaint about obstruction from the UN humanitarian inspectors," says Felicity Arbuthnot who, like Jane Howarth, has travelled frequently to Iraq and studied the effects of sanctions.

Three weeks ago, the UN released its own study which ought to have made headlines; the bombing of Serbia was then under way. Noting that sanctions had transformed Iraq in nine years from "relative affluence" to "massive poverty", it described the oil-for-food programme as having failed to cope with the "dire" humanitarian situation. Iraq's infant mortality rate, said the UN, was now the highest in the world and chronic malnutrition affected a quarter of children under five.

By any standards of civilised behaviour, those who perpetuate this state of affairs are guilty of what will be seen, I have no doubt, as one of the great and enduring crimes of the late 20th century. The official apologists will not be forgotten.

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