

## **The Road to Iraq**

*Leslie Stahl: "We have heard that half a million children have died [as a result of the U.S. economic sanctions against Iraq]. I mean, that is more children than died in Hiroshima. Is the price worth it?"*

*Madeleine Albright: "We think the price is worth it."*

-- "60 Minutes"

### **March 6, 1999.**

We left Amman, Jordan at four a.m. this morning for the twelve hour drive through the desert to Iraq. In every direction, I can see nothing but a flat, barren desert extending far into the horizon. Overhead, the moon shines brightly. Silence falls upon our little delegation as the reality of Iraq looms ahead.

Every day this week the United States has bombed Iraq. Last evening, several civilians were killed in Northern Iraq by U.S. F-15e fighter bombers. On December 7, 1993, I hammered on one of those Air Force bombers in a "plowshares" disarmament action at the Seymour Johnson Air Force Base in Goldsboro, North Carolina. That felony "crime" landed me in the county jail for eight months. I wrote then that I was trying to love my enemies by trying to stop my government's efforts to kill them. This trip is another way to love my country's enemies.

We drive to Iraq to walk with the suffering people even as those death machines continue to rain down their terror, and a new form of warfare--economic sanctions--quietly, legally, kills an entire generation of Iraqi children.

Our Fellowship of Reconciliation delegation includes two Nobel Peace prize winners. Mairead Corrigan Maguire from Belfast, Northern Ireland, won the 1976 Nobel Peace Prize after her relatives were killed and she helped organize peace marches across the country. She co-founded the Peace People movement, and travels around the world speaking out for nonviolence. Adolfo Perez Esquivel from Buenos Aires, Argentina, is an artist, human rights advocate, and the coordinator of SERPAJ, the Service for Peace and Justice movement in Latin America. After he was arrested and tortured by the junta in the late 1970s, he organized a widespread nonviolent resistance movement and won the 1980 Nobel Peace Prize. Akadim Chikandamina, an activist from Zimbabwe who was imprisoned for four years for his work for justice, serves as the President of the International Fellowship of Reconciliation. Our great friends Kathy Kelly, Rick McDowell and Mike Bremer of "Voices in the Wilderness," the U.S. campaign to end the sanctions on Iraq, organized our trip and complete our delegation.

As we speed along the highway, the sun rises over the desert, a great spectacular ball of orange fire in a sky of pink and blue. In the distance, we see the tents of the Bedouin peoples. The road ahead disappears into the horizon.

These days the road to peace, for us North Americans, begins on this long desert road to Iraq. More and more of us need to make this long night's journey into

daylight. It is a difficult but necessary journey. If we want to love our enemies as Jesus commanded, instead of bombing them or starving them to death, then we need to oppose the U.S. sanctions and start down this road to Iraq.

At the moment, Iraq is the number one enemy of the United States. With a population of 23.5 million people, Iraq had been a prosperous nation ten years ago with first rate hospitals and schools. Since the economic sanctions were imposed in August 6, 1990, and with the ensuing Gulf war and regular bombardments, Iraq's civilian infrastructure has been systematically destroyed.

Before the Gulf war, one Iraqi dinar equaled three U.S. dollars. Now, one Iraqi dinar equals fifteen cents. Before the war, an Iraqi doctor earned the extravagant salary of 3,000 IDs per month, about \$10,000, in a country where major expenses like healthcare and education were free, and housing and food were cheap. The Iraqi doctors we will meet on this journey now earn the equivalent of about \$4.50 a month. No U.S. Congressional representatives, senators or elected officials, except for Bill Richardson, have visited Iraq since 1990. They have been cut off from the West, and systematically crushed.

According to the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and the World Health Organization, over 500,000 children under the age of five have died as a result of the sanctions. If we add seven year olds, twelve year olds, diabetics, cancer patients, the elderly and all those denied medicine, adequate food and clean water, no one can count the dead in Iraq. Approximately 200 children die silently each day. One million children under five are chronically malnourished. Not only is there is a lack of food and medicine, but the water is contaminated, and the sanitation and sewage systems have been destroyed by the 1991 bombings and subsequent sanctions, so that even if the children are healed, they quickly get sick again. The cycle of disease is relentless, and will continue to kill as long as sanctions remain in place.

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I write this as we drive through the desert. Adolfo sleeps. Mairead prays through the psalms. Kathy, Mike and Akadim sip their instant coffee. The stark surroundings remind me of my many trips to the Nevada Test Site, where we demonstrate against nuclear weapons testing. I remember one beautiful gathering there, shortly after the Gulf War, when the great Brazilian Archbishop Dom Helder Camara said, "The desert is a good friend. We must transform this place of terrible violence into a place of beautiful nonviolence." Like Jesus, we must go to the desert, he said, to reject the demons of violence and become people of peace and nonviolence.

Jesus knew well this long, desert road to peace. The Gospels confess that he took many trips into enemy territory, crossing the Sea of Galilee to the other side, walking into Samaria and conversing with the hated enemy. His whole life is a lesson in loving one's enemies. His life journey was one long road to peace, culminating in the road to Jerusalem, the road to Calvary, and eventually, the road to Emmaus.

So it is with us. To follow Jesus on the road to peace, we too have buckle down for the long haul drive through the desert to Iraq, for there Christ suffers and dies again, awaiting our help, our intervention, our hand of love. There, too, we will meet the risen Christ, sending us back home on a mission of peace.

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The vision of peace. My friends and I dream about a new Iraq, about that great day when the U.S. lifts the economic sanctions, ends its bombing raids, stops its racism, stereotypes and prejudice, abolishes its weapons of mass destruction, and creates a new haven of clean water, bountiful food, good medicine, healthcare, jobs, and education for all Iraqis, a place where human rights and democracy rules, where children have everything they need, where life can flourish again for everyone, as it did here at the birth of humanity. This land of Mesopotamia is the "cradle of civilization," the birthplace of writing, the wheel, irrigation, and the first published laws. It was the birthplace of Abraham, destination of Jonah, the departure point of the Magi, and the burial place of the evangelist Matthew. Iraq is holy ground. Instead of destroying the land and its people, we should do all we can to protect it and serve these people. By destroying Iraq, we destroy human history. We destroy ourselves in the process.

The vision of peace upholds the possibility that one day the people of Iraq will no longer be our enemies. They will be our friends. We will see them as our sisters and brothers.

Is this vision of ours a mirage? Is what I see on the distant horizon real, or is it a cruel hoax that keeps receding with each passing mile, an unreachable goal that finally vanishes? It is not just the question of this trip, but the question of our lives. The God of peace summons us to make real the vision of peace.

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After passing over the border and crossing the Iraqi desert, we proceed directly to West Baghdad, to the Ameriyah shelter. On February 12, 1991, on the last day of Ramadan and Ash Wednesday, this large public shelter was filled with as many as 1,200 women, children and elderly men, who were celebrating a birthday.

In the early hours of the morning, a U.S. "smart" bomb entered the ventilation shaft, blew open the ceiling, threw 17 people outside, forced the exits closed, and trapped everyone inside. Minutes later, a second "smart" bomb came threw the hole created by the first bomb and incinerated everyone within seconds.

One woman, Umm Greyda, had just stepped outside to do the laundry for her children and relatives. She survived the bombing, and later moved into the shelter to create a permanent memorial to the victims of this massacre, including nine of her children and relatives.

Today, Umm Greyda welcomes us, describes the horrific event, and leads us through the shelter. The large massive concrete structure reminds me of the Sacred Heart Center, a women and children's center I used to direct in Richmond, Virginia.

But here, the concrete walls are charred black. Flowers, prayers, and hundreds of pictures of the children who died that day hang on the walls. We walk through the shelter in shock. We see where children who were sleeping on the top bunks had scratched the ceiling, leaving charred hand prints, in the moments before they

burned to death. I remember seeing the same desperate handprints on the ceilings of the gas chambers in Auschwitz.

On one wall, we see the outline of a woman who had been instantly incinerated. The whole concrete wall was charcoal black except for the white area where she would have stood. Her arm is outstretched, pointing. "I have seen this before," Adolfo says quietly, "in Hiroshima." Another white shadow shows the outline of a mother holding up a child.

We gather below the mammoth hole where the bombs entered. Umm Greyda tells us that the killings continue every day, as thousands continue to die from the economic sanctions. On behalf of people of faith and conscience across the United States, I express our sorrow, ask forgiveness, and pledge to work for an end to the sanctions and the killings. I present her with over a thousand signed statements, "A Covenant of Peace with the People of Iraq," from religious congregations across the United States. We join hands. Adolfo offers a prayer for forgiveness, peace, and an end to the U.S. bombings and economic sanctions. In tears, we embrace.

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Later, we meet with representatives of the various non-governmental organizations working in Baghdad: Enfants du Monde, the Middle East Council of Churches, Bridges to Baghdad, the International Federation of the Red Cross, and Life for Relief and Development. Each NGO representative confirms the report of the devastation and death caused by the ongoing economic sanctions and the destruction of Iraq's infrastructure. "A whole generation has been destroyed," one official solemnly tells me.

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In the evening, we spend over two hours with Deputy Prime Minister Tariq Aziz, who described the effects of economic sanctions on Iraq. "Why does the U.S. refuse to dialogue with Iraq?" he asked. "They have to demonize us if they want to destroy us. And they are determined to destroy us. These sanctions are murdering the children." He explained in detail how the lack of medicine and food kills Iraqi children.

During the conversation, we pledged to continue our efforts to end the sanctions and bombardments. Mairead then said that the Iraqi government should also uphold the human rights of its citizens, regardless of race, religion or ethnicity. "We all agree that our common goal should be to preserve life and create dialogue," Tariq Aziz responded. He asked us to invite U.S. Congress members and religious leaders to visit Iraq to pursue these goals.

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### **March 7, 1999**

This morning, we drove to the Dijla Primary School in downtown Baghdad. As we walked into the school compound, hundreds of young girls welcomed us with flowers, songs and dance. We were deeply touched by this warm reception. Then they stood solemnly and began to sing an Arabic rendition of "We Shall Overcome." They knew

that the Fellowship of Reconciliation had been deeply involved in the civil rights movement, and that Mairead and Adolfo were prestigious Nobel Peace Laureates. "We are not afraid," they sang. "We shall live in peace. We'll walk hand in hand. We shall overcome." It was one of the most moving experiences I have ever witnessed.

After their beautiful performance, the students gathered around each one of us to meet and talk. Their smiles quickly vanished as the pain and anger surfaced. They told us about hiding from bombing raids, about their fear, about the effects of the sanctions, about the death of loved ones.

"Why is your government bombing us?," one impassioned girl asked me. "Why are you killing us? We want to live in love and friendship and peace with American kids. What have we done to you?"

Later, the principal told us about last December's bombing raid by U.S. aircraft over Baghdad. The students were terrorized. They have not yet recovered from that frightening experience. We embraced the children, took photos, and promised that we would do what we could to stop the war and help create peace between our countries.

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The worst was yet to come. We pulled up to the Al Mansour Pediatrics Hospital. From outside, it looked like any hospital in a small American town. Inside, we saw first hand the death we inflict on Iraqis by the sanctions. We met the hospital director, the doctors, nurses, and the dying children and their mothers on the cancer and severe malnutrition wards. Up to seven children die each day in this one hospital, we are told, due to the absence of medicine, technical equipment, electricity and clean water. "The death rate is increasing because of the sanctions, although we do our best to reverse it," the director explained. They simply do not have the resources to heal these sick children. Before 1990, they could have.

There before our eyes we saw the reality of sanctions. We walked solemnly from bed to bed, held the hands of the dying children, embraced the weeping mothers, and listened to the pleas of the doctors. Mairead spent a long time holding one particular crying child, dying of kidney cancer and suffering severe abnormalities. The mothers dressed in black did not say much. They sat beside each bed, weeping silently, looking up at us.

Adolfo and I met Sara, a sick little six year old girl who is so depressed about the war that she has stopped eating. She no longer wants to live, her mother told us. We spoke to her, watched her play a game, listened to her, and told her about our efforts around the world to end the war and create peace. Then we asked her to eat for us. After much prodding, she agreed. But she looked so sad. "We're not leaving until you smile," Adolfo said to her. So we sat there by her bed, looking into her eyes, trying to offer her our love. Finally, slowly, a beautiful, heartbreaking smile appeared.

Through their tears, every mother we met thanked us for coming to visit. They also thanked us for speaking out against the sanctions on behalf of their dying children. The doctors told us again that they did not have enough medicine or medical equipment to attend to the needs of the children, and that the children will met will

all die soon. Even if they had the basic supplies to heal these children, sooner or later, the contaminated water throughout Iraq would kill them. In particular, they pointed to the sharp rise in cancers and birth defects, appearing, especially in the South near Basrah, due to the contamination from the U.S. bombings and depleted uranium.

"These children are innocent people," the director said with great passion. "They are not hurting the United States or Britain. They are not violating your air space. They have a right to food, medicine, and clean water. They have the right to live. They should not die because of your desire for oil. They ask only to live their lives peacefully, normally. Let them live. Please."

The visit to the hospital was heartbreaking. It reminds me of the biblical story of Herod's slaughter of the innocents at the time of Jesus' birth. I understood anew the biblical tale of Rachel weeping uncontrollably for her children. Most of all, I felt like I had been at Calvary, and seen Christ crucified all over again in the Iraqi children, dying on the cross of U.S. economic sanctions, with his grieving, weeping mother, dressed in black, by his side. Our country crucifies Christ in the poor and in our enemies all over again. We left traumatized by what we saw, and road off in silence, praying for an end to the suffering.

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At noon, we met the staff of the Umm 'Amarik Research Center which studies and documents the Gulf War and its aftermath, the ongoing U.S. bombings and the long-term economic sanctions. They report in detail that the U.S. now coats its bombs with depleted uranium which poisons the land, cattle, animals, rivers, water and unborn children. U.S. depleted uranium has brought a dramatic increase in cancer and physiological abnormalities throughout Iraq. Children are dying from diarrhea and dehydration. The ongoing U.S. bombing raids have destroyed Iraq's capacity to clean and purify its water. Clean water can no longer be restored without massive financial assistance, on the level of the huge international Marshall Plan.

"We would like to wish you a happy visit to Iraq," one researcher concluded. "But we are a suffering and dying people, and if you come to Baghdad, you will suffer with us. You cannot be happy visiting us. But you have to help us. Tell the world that the people of Iraq are being suffocated in silence."

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Next, we visited the United Nations' "Office of the Humanitarian Coordinator in Iraq," We spoke for several hours with Deputy Director Farid Zarif, along with staff members of the Food and Agriculture Organization, the World Health Organization, the World Food Program, UNICEF, and UNESCO. Dr. Zarif explained that the food distribution system is closely monitored by the United Nations and was satisfactory.

"Iraq needs medicine, but also electricity, clean water, and sanitation," Dr. Zarif said. He emphasized that the deterioration of the humanitarian situation can not be prevented by United Nations' programs as they presently stand without the infusion of billions of dollars to repair and restore Iraq's infrastructure. Even the current stores of medicine are not sufficient, he concluded, because while they may bring

temporary relief, the cycle of disease is "vicious and ubiquitous." In other words, the children will keep on dying, according to the United Nations representatives in Iraq.

Later, we visited with the Papal Nuncio, Rev. Giuseppe Lazarotto, and a colleague, Rev. Jusuf Habib, respected Christian leaders in Iraq. "The main problem in Iraq, besides the death of the children, is the lack of hope," they both said. "The image of Iraqis outside the country is completely false. Iraqis are a cordial, hospitable, and open people. We invite others to come and visit us, to help save the children of Iraq and to give us all hope."

Afterwards, we toured Saddam City, one of the poorest areas on the outskirts of Baghdad, and the site of recent riots. Everywhere we saw sewage flowing in front of each cinderblock concrete house. Crowds of people mill around with nothing to do. We purchased some clothing items as gifts for family and friends back home. In doing so, we violated the sanctions themselves.

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### **March 8, 1999**

This morning, we met with a Muslim Iman, Dr. Abdul Razak Abdul Rahman. He was warm, gracious and hospitable. He thanked us for our visit and spoke of the deep pain he feels over the suffering and death of his people. He begged us to do all that we could to end the sanctions. We promised once again to try.

Then, we drove to one of the main hotels in downtown Baghdad for a press conference to report our findings. The room was packed with journalists from around the Middle East, as well as CNN and the Associated Press.

"We call for the immediate lifting of the economic sanctions, an end to the U.S. bombings of Iraq and nonviolent resolutions to this crisis," I said on behalf of the delegation in our opening statement.

"This is genocide, plain and simple," Adolfo Perez Esquivel said. "Children are dying slowly and painfully. If we want democracy and human rights in Iraq, we have to stop the economic sanctions which kill innocent people and destroy all educational and social services."

"I have seen children dying with their mothers sitting next to them, not able to do anything," Mairead Maguire said with great emotion. She told about her experience in Northern Ireland and her work for peace and reconciliation. "The President of the United States should seek peace with Iraq just as he helped us forge a peace deal in Northern Ireland. We in Ireland are grateful for what the United States has helped us accomplish in the recent peace agreement. But the U.S. president should be consistent in his call for dialogue and disarmament as the only way to make peace. Just as he said Northern Ireland should pursue dialogue and disarmament, so too the United States should pursue dialogue and disarmament. The United States should stop the economic sanctions and bombings of Iraq, and begin to dialogue with Iraq."

"In fifty years," Mairead concluded, "the next generation will ask us, 'Where were you when the children of Iraq were dying?'"

"Last November, the United Nations named the first decade of the new millennium to be a 'Decade for a Culture of Peace and Nonviolence for the Children of the World,'" the laureates said in their concluding statement. "We believe that the United Nations should help begin this decade by working immediately to lift the economic sanctions, ending the U.S. bombings, and stopping the horrific suffering and murder of the children of Iraq. Then, they should get on with the massive aid to help rebuild the country, clean up the environment, and build a new peaceful Middle East."

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As we drove out of Baghdad and back through the desert to Jordan, I recalled the faces of the children, and promised myself that I would speak out against the sanctions wherever I go from now on.

I was deeply moved by the warm hospitality and kindness of the Iraqi people, but overwhelmed by the suffering I saw. No one supports the tyranny or violence of the Iraqi government, but the children of Iraq are not dying because of the Iraqi government. They were born long after the invasion of Kuwait and the Gulf war. They are dying because of our economic sanctions. The lack of food and medicine is not due to Iraqi selfishness, but to the nature of the sanctions themselves. Three U.N. officials working in Iraq have resigned from the U.N., calling the policy genocidal.

The economic sanctions on Iraq are not just a humanitarian crisis, but a moral and spiritual disaster. As I visited Baghdad, the head of the Pentagon toured the Middle East, stirring up fear against Iraq and forcing each of Iraq's neighbors to buy billions of dollars of U.S. weapons. At the same time, President Clinton toured El Salvador and Guatemala, where he expressed "regret" for the U.S. support of genocide against the indigenous peoples during the 1970s and 1980s.

Today, the U.S. genocide of Iraq continues. In the name of democracy, we massacre the "holy innocents" through this new type of warfare, sanctions. The ride back is quiet. We look out into the desert. We say our prayers.

Mairead's question lingers in the air along with the cries of the children.

"Where were you while the children of Iraq were dying?"