

It is ironic how those who have suffered most in Iraq had the least to do with the reasons provided for the war. Children especially are most vulnerable victims in such situations as their inexperienced minds are unable to grasp the intricacies of an increasingly complex world. Unusual events affect them in different ways and have lasting impact on them.

Different organizations such as the 'UNICEF' and 'Save The Children' have launched various projects concerning health and childcare. However, despite their efforts, the living standard of an average Iraqi child still remains appalling. The ever-deteriorating condition of Iraqi children (which constitute about 13 million of Iraq's population) is due to the country's indulgence in international affairs. Whenever there is war in the country, they are the ones who have to pay the heaviest price.

Quite a few of them die; some are injured seriously or become disabled for the rest of their lives, while others suffer from various psychological diseases.

Aggressive war often results in uprooting children from their homes, compelling them to live as refugees in different parts of the world, sometimes in their own country too. Insecurity plagues them and they often lose basic zeal for life. Recently, despite UNO's resolutions, another war has originated in the world having even

# The plight of Iraqi children

BY MAHWISH RIAZ KHAN

**Military interventions leave children psychologically traumatised.**

more adverse effects on the children of Iraq than the Gulf war of 1991.

According to experts, 500,000 Iraqi children are already malnourished. This is in part due to continual sanctions by UN and in part because of inadequate access to health services and lack of clean drinking water and sanitation.

According to an estimate, the under-five mortality in southern and central Iraq, where 85% of country's population reside, doubled from 56 deaths per 1000 live births (1984-89) to 131 deaths per 1000 live births (1994-99). In the northern region of the country, the under-five mortality rate rose from 80 deaths from 1000 live births (1984-89) to 90 deaths per 1000 live births (1989-94). These figures highlight the extent of the perpetual humanitarian crisis in Iraq.

Lack of water sewage treatment plants only add to the plight of Iraqi children. They are compelled to get water wherever they find it, whether it is drinkable or not, exposing them to various epidemic diseases. According to UNICEF, more than 100,000 Iraqi children under the age of five are at high risk of contracting water-borne

illnesses. Gastroenteritis is one of the most common killers in Iraq and its main cause is contaminated water.

Besides unhealthy water, other factors are also at work, which are responsible for the inhumane conditions of Iraqi children. Extensive chemical weapons used in war have polluted the whole environment and nearby water resources. During aggressive attacks, millions of gallons of oil went up in flames, which have created respiratory problems among the locals. Infact, the long term harmful consequences of first Gulf war hadn't been compensated yet.

According to an estimate, Iraq's cancer, leukaemia and malignancy rate has risen up to seven folds since the Gulf war—a rise associated with depleted Uranium weapons used primarily by US and UK, which left a

residue of radioactive dust throughout the country, which has entered the food chain via water table and soil.

Thus Iraqis are 'surrounded' by hostile and unfavorable conditions. They have been forced to eat the contaminated food and breathe in the poisonous environment. One Kuwaiti described breathing was "like taking the exhaust pipe of a diesel truck in your mouth and breathing that". Even if a strong healthy person breaths in such environment, he cannot stay healthy for a long time so when young children with developing respiratory systems inhale that poisonous air, they are more susceptible to diseases. Therefore, children born in such environment aren't like normal human beings but just like a remnant of chemical weapons with parts of bodies missing and showing mental disorders without having any genetic inheritances.

Apart from physical suffering, military interventions leave children psychologically traumatized. Iraqi children who had witnessed the first Gulf war have terror embedded in their subconscious. They show many mental and behavioral disorders. And now,

the second Gulf war has even triggered up the ambient fear of war. In Iraq, children as young as four have clear concepts of the horrors of war. They are well aware of their predicament. All of them detest the armed conflicts and are in a fit of despondency. Fear of death hangs over their heads. They still believe that anything bad could happen to them anytime. There have been desultorinesses in their studies and even their educational work assignments reflect their mental state. They show detonating bombs and guns firing at their houses in their drawings. Thus, this war has enfeebled their resistance to life even more.

In such situation, in order to protect the children of Iraq, if nothing else, the best can be done to promote peace and tolerance among children by making the circumstances more extenuating. A common consensus must be developed between Government and armed political movements not to attack the children and to provide them the basic facilities of life during militarism. They should have access to at least 'clean water' and 'clean environment' in all cases. Aggressive terrorism shouldn't be condemned at the cost of environmental terrorism. Whether it's a war for terrorism or for oil, human life comes before everything. Every child has a birthright to live, regardless of belonging to Iraq, Afghanistan or America.

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