

Sanctions against Iraq form of warfare: opposition MP

By Jon Elmer

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HALIFAX (CUP) - United Nation sponsored sanctions are devastating the most vulnerable in Iraq, says an opposition politician who is currently touring Canadian universities.

Svend Robinson, a New Democratic Party MP, knows from his firsthand experience the harsh impact the sanctions have had.

"The situation in Iraq is one that I react to with urgency, anguish, anger and shame," said Robinson in a recent talk

at Dalhousie University. "As a Canadian my government is a part of this."

The sanctions have been in place ever since Iraq's 1991 defeat in the Persian Gulf War, and are widely held to be one of the most brutal embargoes ever enforced on a nation.

Recent UNICEF studies show the death toll among children is 5,000 per month, a direct result of what Robinson says is the use of "hunger and poverty as instruments of war"

Both the Geneva and UN Charters condemn the use of starvation and malnutrition as warfare.

The sanctions prohibit import of anything that can be of "dual purpose" for use in military devices - a list that includes toilet paper,

children's potties and pencils, "because of the lead content of graphite."

Meanwhile, the UN's 'Oil-for-Food' program, where Iraq sells a fraction of its oil supply in return for

aid, amounts to a mere 25 cents daily for each Iraqi.

Robinson, who has visited Iraq, says the country is facing horrible conditions.

"I was returning to a situation of collapse," he said. "Not just of physical infrastructure, but the whole social and intellectual infrastructure as well."

With its severe shortage, only three per cent of funds are allocated to education. Add to this a ban on all types of books and journals prohibited for import, the country is literally being caught off from

mass amounts of intellectual information.

"It is often forgotten that in 1990, despite the Iran-Iraq war [during the 1980s], Iraq was one of the most advanced countries in the Middle East in economic, social and cultural rights," wrote Robinson

in his January 2000 Delegation Report on Iraq.

Today, the NDP politician says, the system in ruins, unemployment is epidemic, inflation is skyrocketing and the average salary is \$5 (US) a month.

Add to this appalling cancer rates and massive numbers of congenital deformities - this past year there were 165 cases alone in a single tiny clinic in the city of Basra - due to thousands of tonnes of depleted uranium in bombs that have been rained down on Iraq.

And the bombings still continue: in the 18 months between May 1998 and January of this year,

some

22,000 combat missions were flown in southern Iraq alone.

Robinson argues that once Canadians truly know what Ottawa, who supports the UN sanctions, are party to in Iraq they will demand change.

The opposition politician also said that those opposed to sanctions are not supporters of Saddam Hussein, the Iraqi dictator.

In fact, says Robinson, asking for the removal of sanctions does not affect the Iraqi ruling class because the leaders of Iraq are the least to suffer from the sanctions.

It is the poor who are suffering the most.

But as he ended his talk, Robinson left the crowd with a note of optimism.

"Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has." □



New Democratic Party MP Svend Robinson



Art by Eric Stanton