

# A nation that can pay for its own aid

by David Bryer

*The author, Overseas Director of the relief agency Oxfam, recently returned from Iraq. This article first appeared in the English weekly The Observer on Sept. 15, and is reprinted here, slightly abridged, with the kind permission of Mr. Bryer and of The Observer.*

A return to normality is what strikes one first in Baghdad. Beneath the vast portraits of President Saddam which dominate the city and its people, traffic hurtles along, shops are well-stocked and bomb damage has been largely repaired. But the air of well-being in the capital conceals a potential disaster for the mass of Iraqi people, as the economy collapses and hunger and disease take their toll—a toll which will escalate unless U.N. Secretary General Pérez de Cuellar's recommendation to honor the agreed amount of humanitarian aid is quickly implemented.

Iraq has become dependent on food imports over the years; 70% of all supplies come from outside the country. By 1990 this food was available to all through an unusually effective distribution system introduced during the Iran-Iraq War. But with the imposition of sanctions in August 1990, food through the system became rationed. At first it could be supplemented by buying on the open market, but prices have rocketed: flour by 20 times, sugar 14 times, tea 11 times, and rice 8 times. Wages have remained almost static.

A Baghdad housewife told us that the monthly ration for her family of six, costing 10 dinars, was enough for 10 days only. Food for the rest of the month has to be bought in the market at a cost of 150 dinars. Given that the government wage ranges from 100 to 200 dinars a month, and that rent, clothes, water, electricity also have to be paid for, she wondered how long they could survive by relying on loans and selling off their limited assets.

For others in southern Iraq, where the Shia uprising following the Gulf war caused as much destruction as the war itself, the situation is much worse. In the province of Misan this year's cereal harvest has been a disaster. As a result of the bombing of the electricity network in the war, farmers almost totally dependent on electrically pumped irrigation suddenly found themselves without water at the critical growing time. There are no spare parts available and the prospects for the October planting season are grim.

Inadequate food supplies and failing agriculture are now added to serious health problems. In the large town of Al Amarah smashed pipes and broken pumps have caused sew-

age to flow through the streets, forming vast lakes. Given that cracked water pipes lie within the sewage streams, it is no surprise that cholera, typhoid, and diarrheal diseases are being reported.

In a clinic in the town of Salam, where 30,000 people live on the edge of the marshes, there are the first tell-tale signs of the malnutrition diseases, marasmus and kwashiorkor; neither has been seen by health workers there for decades, but now 400 children under the age of two are coming to the clinic for supplementary feeding. It may not be long before the scenes come to resemble camps in Ethiopia or Sudan, rather than a once-prosperous oil state.

If life is difficult in the plains between the Tigris and the Euphrates, it is equally so in the mountains of the northeast, where over 1 million Kurdish refugees have returned to their villages from Turkey and Iran, while others are moving back from "controlled" villages established by the Iraqi government in the 1980s. . . .

There are indications that a joint Kurdish-Iraqi government approach to the distribution of food rations to the returnees can be set up. Currently food is being provided through the U.N. High Commission for Refugees, and Oxfam is helping with water supplies. But the U.N. mandate to provide humanitarian aid expires at the end of this year, and officials are concerned about what happens next. Renewed hostilities could lead to yet another Kurdish exodus to the mountains. Only a lasting political settlement will enable the Kurds to rebuild their lives.

Eight years of the Iran-Iraq War, followed by the Gulf war earlier this year, and the subsequent Kurdish and Shia uprisings, have had a devastating impact on what used to be a reasonably well-off country. . . .

The U.N. Security Council has already agreed to allow the sale of Iraqi oil to the tune of \$1.6 billion into an escrow account to pay for humanitarian food and supplies, as well as war reparations. The Sanctions Committee will oversee oil sales, and monitor distribution of these supplies. But according to a report by the secretary general of the Security Council last week, almost completely ignored by the media, it will be too little too late. He has recommended raising the ceiling on oil sales to \$2.5 billion for two reasons: The \$1.6 billion will cover barely half the minimum relief supplies recommended by Prince Sadruddin's mission in August, because deductions for war reparations, monitoring, and other costs leaves it short by \$800 million; the report also points out that because the oil income has to go into the escrow account in three separate slices and build up to \$520 million before any money can be released for humanitarian supplies, relief will not reach ordinary Iraqis for two to three months.

Iraq can pay for the shortfall (unlike poorer, famine-hit parts of the world), if it is allowed to sell more oil more quickly, as recommended by Pérez de Cuellar. But time is running out for most ordinary Iraqis, who face a winter of growing hunger and spreading disease.