

Momentum Builds in Congress To Change U.S. Iraq Policy

by Carl Osgood

White House National Security Adviser Sandy Berger, in an article in the May 4 London *Financial Times*, reiterated the tired assertion that all of Iraq's problems can be laid at the feet of Saddam Hussein. He listed the usual stories about how Hussein and other top leaders of the country are living it up in luxury while the population starves. He asserted that the oil-for-food program is allowing Iraq to export oil and import food at "pre-war levels." "With oil prices rising," he claimed, "revenues are surging, and Iraq has record resources for the purchase of food and medicine" — which is a strange thing to say, given that the oil-for-food program is based on dollar amounts of exports every six months, not barrels of oil. He claimed that if the sanctions were lifted, "there would be no improvement in Iraq's ability to export oil," because it can now export all it wants. "There would be no improvement in Iraq's ability to import food and medicine; it can now import all it needs." Berger concluded that the best way to help Iraqis, "is to encourage change within Iraq." In other words, as the subtitle to the article says, "A Change of Government, Not the Ending of Sanctions, Is the Only Way To Alleviate the Suffering of the Nation."

Berger's article appeared only a day after a forum on Capitol Hill, sponsored by Rep. Dennis Kucinich (D-Ohio), exposed the outright falsehoods of Berger's argument. The panel assembled by Kucinich included former UN officials Denis Halliday, Hans von Sponek, and former senior UN weapons inspector Scott Ritter. All three resigned from their UN posts to protest ongoing policies, and all three are more than qualified to speak on the effects of the sanctions, the impact of the oil-for-food program, and the actual nature of the threat represented by Saddam Hussein. Rounding out the panel were Kucinich's colleagues, Reps. John Conyers (D-Mich.) and Cynthia McKinney (D-Ga.).

Kucinich's forum was only the latest development in a growing movement in the U.S. Congress against the sanctions. Last January, Reps. Tom Campbell (R-Calif.) and Conyers circulated a letter to President Bill Clinton, that was signed by 70 members of the House, calling on the President to "de-link" the economic sanctions from the military sanctions in place against Iraq. The letter notes that, after more

than nine years, the embargo has failed to remove Saddam from power, nor "even ensured his compliance with his international obligations, while the economy and people of Iraq continue to suffer."

While the Clinton Administration continues to argue that the sanctions are necessary to prevent Iraq from threatening its neighbors, the letter says, "The goal of these sanctions seems to have changed. The original UN resolutions imposed sanctions to pressure Iraq to eliminate its weapons of mass destruction programs. Statements by U.S. officials, including Secretary [of State Madeleine] Albright and Sandy Berger, rather, suggest that sanctions will remain in place until Saddam Hussein is removed, or even beyond. This policy clearly undermines the original intention of the sanctions, around which the international consensus against Iraq was originally based, and makes the children and families of Iraq into virtual hostages in the political deadlock between the U.S. and the government of Iraq. Morally, it is wrong to hold the Iraqi people responsible for the actions of a brutal and reckless government. Politically, this policy deprives the Iraqi regime of any incentive to comply with UN resolutions and international norms."

Hall Visits Iraq

In April, Rep. Tony Hall (D-Ohio) became the first member of Congress to visit Iraq since long before the 1991 Gulf War. He was the first member of the U.S. Congress to see for himself the devastation that exists there, today. While Hall didn't go so far as to call for the lifting of sanctions, and while he included the obligatory language against Saddam as being largely responsible for the suffering in his country, he did call on the UN sanctions committee, in an April 24 statement, to "use much better judgment" in its work. He reported that American officials told him that only a small number of items raise security concerns, yet, entire shipments are held up by the sanctions committee because of these concerns. He called on the UN to use a "line-item veto" approach to evaluating humanitarian shipments, so that needed goods could be shipped to Iraq much more quickly.

Hall said, "I fear that no matter how quickly sanctions are

lifted, the future of most of the people I met in Iraq will be bleak. That is because its children are in bad shape, with a quarter of them underweight and one in ten wasting away because of hunger and disease.” Diarrhea is the leading cause of childhood death, and polio, which has been wiped out in most of the Middle East, “has returned to plague Iraq’s people.” He called for an end to the “stalemate” between Iraq and the United States so that a way can be found out of the impasse.

The Kucinich forum focussed, in part, on refuting the claims made by the Administration, in a letter by President Clinton in response to the Campbell letter, and repeated by Berger in his *Financial Times* piece.

In his opening remarks, Kucinich noted that the humanitarian situation in Iraq has been worsening since the oil-for-food program began in 1996, and, according to various UN reports, several thousand children die every month due to disease and malnutrition. Kucinich added that access to fresh water in urban areas is 50% of 1990 levels, and 35% in rural areas. He called this “clearly unacceptable.” He said that “legitimate concern about Iraq’s military capacity does not allow us to punish 22 million Iraqi civilians. The sanctions have brought devastation and death to a country that used to be the center of knowledge, prosperity, medical progress, and most importantly, a normal way of life.”

A Bipartisan Delegation Proposed

Conyers proposed that a bipartisan Congressional delegation travel to Iraq to see for itself the devastation that has been wrought there. He then addressed the Clinton Administration’s response to the Campbell letter, especially refuting the notion that the oil-for-food program has had any substantial effect on the population. “The food and medicine is one incredibly important step toward helping, but until we deal with the infrastructure,” that is, the physical economic infrastructure, very little progress can be made in bringing the Iraqi population back up to an acceptable level of health, he said.

Conyers noted that a delegation of about 15 of his constituents, led by Archbishop Thomas Gumbleton of the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Detroit, were present in the audience. Conyers reported that Gumbleton and leaders of the Muslim community of Detroit have been waging a tireless campaign to lift the economic sanctions so that the suffering of the Iraqi population can be brought to an end.

McKinney called on more people to become involved in U.S. foreign policy. Foreign policy has been “the preserve of the rich of this country, and ordinary folks like us were not supposed to play in that playground. That was a ball we couldn’t have, and that’s why the foreign policy of this country has been so bad, particularly for people of color,” she said. She expressed particular outrage at a statement Secretary of State Albright made on CBS’s “60 Minutes” in 1996, that the deaths of thousands of children in Iraq because of the sanctions “is a price worth paying.”



A sick baby at Saddam’s Children’s Hospital in Baghdad. The sanctions against Iraq are punishing the civilian population, including hundreds of thousands of children who have died from lack of adequate nutrition, clean water, and health care and medical supplies.

Von Sponek, who resigned as head of the UN humanitarian program in Iraq last February, documented the destructive effects of the sanctions on the population of Iraq, from both a physical health and an intellectual standpoint. He took particular issue with the assertion in Clinton’s reply to the Campbell letter, that the oil-for-food program “has made a major difference in the lives of ordinary Iraqis.” In 1996, when it began, the amount of oil Iraq was allowed to sell every six months amounted to an annual average of \$113 per year per person, hardly enough to make a difference. In 1999, the program was up to \$252 per year per person. That money, von Sponek pointed out, has to finance everything. “Don’t tell me,” he said, “that \$252 guarantees a nice, dignified life.”

Von Sponek documented the increased susceptibility of the population to diseases that were once on the verge of being wiped out, and the collapse in literacy, from the 90% that

prevailed in 1990, to perhaps 60% today. He especially decried what he termed the “intellectual embargo,” which prevents scholarly materials, even sheet music, from being mailed into Iraq.

“Economic sanctions,” von Sponek said, “have led to nothing except suffering. They have failed. They’ve kept the regime in place. . . . They’ve led to a social transformation because, gradually, the middle class, an educated, strong appreciative middle class in the Middle East, has been forced out . . . has emigrated, has been deprofessionalized.” Replacing the destroyed middle class are black marketeers and similar types of operators who prefer to see the sanctions remain in place, because the embargo serves their own interests.

In calling for a new policy, von Sponek said, “We must look at America as a country that has the magnanimity and the statesmanship to turn around and say we have tried. We have failed with this policy. We must adopt a new policy in order to give people that dignity and the right, under the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, under the UN Charter, and under your own Constitution, the right to live a life as fully as possible.”

A New Policy

Halliday, who had also resigned from his UN post in protest against sanctions policy in November 1998, called for a new kind of policy. The sanctions policy was ostensibly put in place in an attempt to force cooperation from the Iraqi government in the destruction of its weapons of mass destruction, and then became an instrument to force the overthrow of the Saddam Hussein regime. “Sanctions are not likely to bring down a government,” he said, “and they’re even less likely to generate cooperation.” Instead, Halliday proposed an entirely different policy approach, made up of a number of steps. These include reestablishing the weapons inspection regime, with selective sanctions that only target weapons development, and re-opening a dialogue with Baghdad, because only a dialogue can lead to influence and positive change. Other steps include lifting the economic sanctions and allowing U.S. industry to participate in the rebuilding of the infrastructure of the country. He admitted that such an approach entails risks, but “it is difficult to make progress without risks.”

The ‘Mythology’ of the Iraqi Threat

The participant who made the most surprising comments, however, was Scott Ritter. Ritter became a lightning rod for criticism during his tenure on the UN weapons inspection team, because of the cozy relationship he had with U.S. and Israeli intelligence agencies. He was at the center of provocations that led to the December 1998 Desert Fox bombing campaign of Iraq (see *EIR*, Nov. 27, 1998), after resigning from the UN Special Commission (UNSCOM) in August 1998. In his remarks, he exonerated himself in this process, but otherwise introduced rarely heard realities into

the discussion.

After expressing awe and admiration for the moral integrity of both von Sponek and Halliday, Ritter admitted that he was “an unlikely ally” in their cause. However, he said that the issue of Iraq policy and the effects of the sanctions was not a partisan issue, but rather “an American issue,” and that he was sitting before the audience, not as a Republican and a former Marine, “but as an American with a unique perspective.”

Ritter centered his remarks around the “mythology” of the threat that Iraq represents. “We have to overcome the concern about what will happen if the sanctions are lifted,” he argued, criticizing in particular the demonization of Saddam. Saddam is very easy to demonize, but “he’s not the Middle East equivalent of Hitler,” nor is he capable of “dominating the region,” Ritter said.

Ritter defended his role in the demonization of Saddam in 1998 by saying that he was speaking as a weapons inspector, mandated to uphold international law. “It was not my business,” he said, when he spoke before committees of the U.S. Congress, “to put forward a solution on how to solve the Iraqi problem.” He added that he resigned from UNSCOM because the U.S. government was manipulating the process of weapons inspections “as mandated by the Security Council.” He claimed that this manipulation threatened the inspection regime, and that this is what he was warning the Congress about in the late summer and fall of 1998. The culmination of this process was operation Desert Fox and the total collapse of the inspection regime, as he had warned would happen.

Ritter said that the question today, is what kind of a threat Iraq actually represents. He said that Iraq has no weapons of mass destruction, no missiles with a range greater than 150 kilometers, and no missile or chemical weapons production capabilities. He said that if the UN Security Council were to re-evaluate Iraq’s compliance “qualitatively, it would be easy to find Iraq in compliance.” He added, “If sanctions were lifted, with effective monitoring, Iraq would not be able to re-constitute its weapons of mass destruction programs.” Ritter concluded that Halliday’s proposals “must be looked at seriously.”

In summing up the formal presentations, Kucinich said that because of what had been presented, “you can come to understand how wrong the direction of our current policy is, and unless we change directions, there is no way that we can ever hope to see Iraq brought back to the community of nations, and there is no way we can ever hope to see other nations which we might have some difficulties with, be ready to talk to us, if they feel they’re facing total annihilation and destruction. They may take whatever is the most aggressive action they can. So, that’s why the sanctions are inevitably self-defeating.” He said that the “combined testimony” of von Sponek, Halliday, and Ritter “casts a new light on this weapon of foreign policy,” and raises the question, “Where do we go from here?”