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The Evil of Sanctions, Part 1

by Brian Cloughley

When strong governments wish to impose their will on weaker regimes, they often resort to sanctions. The effects have included the death or debilitation of millions of innocent people. Two good examples are Cuba, on which draconian U.S. sanctions have been enforced since 1960, and Iraq, where brutal sanctions were enforced from 1990 to 2003.

In 1959 the Cuban dictator Fulgencio Batista was overthrown. He had ruled with the approval of Washington and the Mafia (who gave him a percentage on their casino operations). The dictator Castro took over and declared himself a communist, prompting the U.S. government to attempt to overthrow him. The illegal attempt to invade the country — the Bay of Pigs fiasco — was a national embarrassment for Washington, and the obvious revenge was to punish the country by the use of sanctions. Almost no contact with Cuba was allowed, and the effects have been monstrous.

Earlier this year the Cato Institute recorded,

> The embargo has been a failure by every measure. It has not changed the course or nature of the Cuban government. It has not liberated a single Cuban citizen. In fact, the embargo has made the Cuban people a bit more impoverished, without making them one bit more free.

Dr. Michèle Barry points out in *Annals of Internal Medicine,*

> Because economic sanctions result in shortages of food and medical supplies, their most severe consequences are often felt by the persons who are least culpable and most vulnerable....
> The U.S. embargo against Cuba, one of the few that includes both food and medicine, has been described as a war against public health with high human costs....

“Most severe consequences” were experienced by the people of Iraq when Washington succeeded in having UN sanctions imposed after Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait in 1990. After the Iraqis were forced out of Kuwait, it was declared that the sanctions were intended to make Iraq comply with UN Security Council Resolution 687, which demanded that Iraq eliminate its weapons of mass destruction and that it recognize the nation-state of Kuwait, which, like America’s major Arab ally, Saudi Arabia, is ruled by an entirely nondemocratic regime.

The absurdity of UNSC 687 was that Rolf Ekeus, the UN representative responsible for identifying and destroying Iraq’s weaponry, had already certified that 817 out of Iraq’s 819 Iraqi long-range missiles had been destroyed. In 1999 a panel of the Security Council announced that all biological and chemical facilities “have been destroyed and rendered harmless.” But that did not deter the sanctions proponents, who imagined that immense national suffering would somehow bring down the despot Saddam.

In 1998 Christian Aid stated,

> The policy of sanctions has also been used to pursue political goals — for example, the removal of the Iraqi regime — beyond the overt scope of Resolution 687, which contained no prescriptions regarding Iraq’s form of government or the conduct of domestic policy. The Iraqi population’s economic and social rights have been seriously infringed by the impact of a prolonged embargo. In an authoritarian state which continued to hold most of the levers of control, much of the burden caused by the embargo fell on the civilian population.

But innocent civilians did not matter to the rest of the world, much of which was duped by the United States and Britain into concluding that Iraq presented a threat to global security, a ridiculous notion.

Killing innocents

In one of the most outrageously illegal acts of the many carried out by Washington and London, it was decided that there should be “no-fly zones” in the north and south of Iraq — covering about half the country — in which no Iraqi aircraft or radar was permitted to operate. (France at first joined in this travesty of legality but then withdrew after realizing that it was absurd and that it had no UN endorsement.)

The purpose of the no-fly zones was ostensibly to protect the Shia population of the south and the Kurds in the north, but in fact they were intended, most successfully, to destroy Iraq’s civilian and defense infrastructure.

The zones had no basis in international law and complemented sanctions in a particularly savage manner. British and American fighter and bomber aircraft roamed the skies, attacking what they considered to be "legitimate targets." But scores of civilians died, as in January 1999, when six children were killed by a plane-fired missile.

But we know that foreign children don't always matter to war planners and their supporters. After all, when U.S. Ambassador to the UN Madeleine Albright was asked on television whether she considered the deaths of half a million children a reasonable result of U.S. sanctions, she replied, "This is a very hard choice, but ... we think the price is worth it."

This callous, pitiless, utterly heartless statement by a most senior official of the U.S. government could have been made by any other U.S. government official. If anyone in an official position in America or Britain disagreed with the pronouncement that the avoidable deaths of half a million children were justified, he kept very quiet about it. They all knew what the policy was. It is notable that during Albright's confirmation hearings preliminary to her becoming secretary of State, none of the senators questioned her on this point. The fact is that they didn't disagree with it, making them complicit in the horrible deaths of hundreds of thousands of Iraqi children.

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