

Welcome to Liberated Iraq

By Entesar Mohammad Ariabi,
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Editor's Note: The following are the remarks of Dr. Entissar Mohammad Ariabi, a pharmacist from Yarmook Hospital who is part of an Iraqi women's delegation touring the U.S., organized by CODEPINK and Global Exchange. She spoke on March 18 in West Palm Beach, Florida.

I came on this speaking trip to the U.S. because when I was home in Baghdad, I watched on TV what President Bush was telling the American people about democracy, freedom, security, and the help that the U.S. is giving the Iraqi people, and I couldn't believe the lies. So I decided to take the risk to come to the U.S. and share with you what's really going on. I do not represent any political organization or ethnic group. I come only as a mother of five, a pharmacist and a human being.

I work in one of the largest hospitals in Baghdad. I stood by helplessly during the 13 years of sanctions and watched my people -- especially children -- die from lack of medicines and poor sanitation. UNICEF estimated that over 200 children died everyday as a direct result of sanctions.

Many people thought that after the U.S. occupied our country and the sanctions were lifted, the health care of the Iraqi people would improve. But the occupation has made it worse. Many of the Iraqi hospitals in cities like Baghdad, Al-Qaim, and Fallujah were bombed and destroyed. Many ambulances were attacked and health workers killed, despite the fact that it is illegal under international law to attack hospitals, ambulances and health workers.

After our hospitals were bombed and looted, millions of dollars were given to contractors to repair them. We suggested that this money be used to buy things that we urgently need, but the contractors refused and instead bought furniture and flowers and superficial things. Meanwhile, we suffer from a critical shortage of medicines, emergency supplies and anesthesia, and there is no sterilization in the operation rooms. As the director of the pharmacy department in my hospital, I refused to sit on a new chair while there were no sterile operating rooms.

Diseases that were under control under the regime of Saddam Hussein, diseases such as cholera, hepatitis, meningitis, polio, have now returned to haunt the population, especially the children. Death due to cancer has increased because treatment programs stopped and medicines are not available. The health of the Iraqi people is also devastated by environmental contamination due to the destruction of our water and sewage systems.

The health of women, particularly pregnant women, has deteriorated. Many pregnant women suffer from malnutrition. When it comes time to give birth, many women prefer to give birth at home because they fear being shot on their way to the hospital and they know the bad conditions in the hospitals. As a result, more women are dying in childbirth, and more babies are dying.

Before the occupation, with all the problems we had under sanctions, Iraq ranked number 80 in the worldwide list of deaths of children under 5. Today, we have jumped up to number 36. UNICEF has said that the rate of severe malnutrition among Iraqi children has almost doubled since the occupation.

We have also lost our most important resources -- our doctors. Iraqi doctors are under attack from all sides. Many have been killed or very badly beaten or arrested by the American troops. In Fallujah, the hospital was bombed and doctors were killed inside. In Haditha, the Americans arrested the doctors in the hospital and beat them very badly. I saw

Dr. Jamil, the only surgeon in the hospital, 21 days later. His face was still swollen and his nose was black and blue. The director was also beaten and held for a week inside the hospital.

With the chaos that has reigned since the invasion, over 200 Iraqi doctors have been kidnapped for ransom. Sometimes their families pay money and they are released, and then the whole family, terrified, flees the country. Others are killed by their kidnappers.

In all, more than 1,000 doctors have left the country. Many of them are our most experienced, most specialized doctors.

Doctors and health workers who stay are overwhelmed by the sheer number of patients and their inability to help them. Where there is a bombing or shootings, dozens of bleeding, mutilated people are rushed to the hospital; there is panic everywhere, and because we don't have the proper care, many of them die. Sometimes the staff are beaten by the patients' families. The families get desperate after seeing their loved ones die because of inadequate care, and take out their frustrations on the hospital staff.

I have seen too many bodies of Iraqis maimed, bleeding, destroyed. They are shot by U.S. troops, blown up by roadside bombs, caught in the crossfire, mutilated by kidnappers. Iraq has become a continuous river of blood. The most beautiful thing God created is the human body. It should not be treated so violently.

I have seen too much suffering, too many orphaned children, too many mothers crying. I cry with them every day. I cry because I can't bear their pain. I cry because I feel so guilty that I can't help the sick and the injured. I cry because I see my people come to the hospital and die.

I remember one day in the hospital we started talking about the Americans and asking if they had brought us anything good. No, we said, with all their wealth and knowledge, they haven't shared their great technology, they haven't given us new equipment, they haven't even given us basic medicines. "Yes, they have given us something," said one doctor. "They brought us cold storage for the corpses."

The U.S. invasion has killed our people, destroyed our lives, ruined our health care system. I want the U.S. troops to get out of my country. I want them to go home now. I think that if the Americans leave, we Iraqis will have more of a chance to come together to heal our wounded nation.

Since the day I arrived in the United States, people ask me if I have any hope. Of course. No one can live without hope. My one sliver of hope lies with the American people. No other force in the world can make the American troops leave our country. No other force in the world can make this government hear our cries. Please don't let us down.