
Pleas for the Children in Afghanistan and Iraq

In a letter to the Prime Minister, John Howard, the President of the Medical Association for Prevention of War (Australia), Dr Susan Wareham, has urged for a halt to the bombing in Afghanistan to allow aid convoys to reach starving people. The call coincides with a World Health Organisation Health Status Update on Afghanistan, issued on October 26 2001, which reports of a probable outbreak of falciparum malaria, one of the most dangerous forms of the mosquito-born disease.

Possible outbreaks of malaria in Nangrahar Province near Jalalabad are now being investigated by the NGO Healthnet International. During September 2001, 269 children were hospitalised in the paediatric ward of Jalalabad Public Health Hospital - more than half with severe conditions, including cerebral malaria. No deaths have been officially reported to date.

Rural medical centres are becoming overburdened, due to population movements away from urban areas. There has been a 60% increase in cases treated in rural areas near Jalalabad over the past two weeks. Health supplies are urgently required for maternal and child care centres in Kabul.

For more information, e-mail: padeyg@who.ch and for information about UNICEF's aid for Afghanistan, call Alanna Sherry or Pam Garcia on Tel + 61 (0) 2 9261 2811, ext 204 or ext 217.

In a separate letter to the Minister for Health, Michael Wooldridge, Dr Wareham raised the issue of the health effects of the economic sanctions against Iraq which have been in place since 1990 saying:

“Evidence from UN and other sources demonstrates that the sanctions have had a devastating effect on death rates amongst children.

... The Australian government, of which you are a senior member, has expressed its absolute support for comprehensive economic sanctions against Iraq. No dissenting voices from within the government are heard publicly on this issue. International reports, available to your department, provide information of the direct effects of the sanctions, including the deaths of several thousand young children in Iraq every month since 1990.

In 1999, the Executive Director of UNICEF, Ms Carol Bellamy, referred to UNICEF field surveys in Iraq which showed that children under five were dying at more than twice the rate of ten years previously. She noted that if the substantial reduction in child mortality throughout Iraq during the 1980s had continued through the 1990s there would have been half a million fewer deaths of children under five during the period 1991-98, and said that the UNICEF findings reveal an ongoing humanitarian emergency. Ms Bellamy also stated that the UNICEF findings could not be easily dismissed as an effort by Iraq to mobilise opposition to UN sanctions. ...

Your department has an international branch concerned with Australia's membership of WHO and with the range of health and associated policy issues considered by other UN agencies such as UNICEF. As a doctor, and a minister, you have had the opportunity to generally consider the health consequences of Western policies, including the virtual destruction of what was once a very good health care system in Iraq.

The overall context includes the apparent trend towards a new international cycle of revenge, hatred and war. As we grieve for the innocent people killed in the USA on 11 September, we should be sensitive also to the suffering of all innocent people, regardless of skin colour or the region where they live.

The key purpose of this open letter to you is to ask that, in the closing phase of your political career, you publicly and explicitly dissociate yourself from the policy of comprehensive economic sanctions against the people of Iraq - noting particularly the deaths of at least half a million children as a result of the sanctions - in favour of policies which target the real criminals of this world.”

For more information, e-mail Dr Wareham: warehams@ozemail.com.au

Earlier, the World Conference on “Lifting the Sanctions Imposed Upon Iraq”, held by Christian and Muslim religious groups and NGOs in Beirut on October 7-9 2001, made the following recommendations:

- Lift the oppressive sanctions against Iraq immediately and without preconditions such as “smart sanctions” or the “oil for food and medicines deal”
- The United Nations to revise the constitution of the International Court of Justice to enable the court to investigate the persecution of states through decisions by the Security Council. In particular, this relates to those decisions issued under article seven of the UN’s charter.
- Anglo-American aggression and aerial bombardment within the no-fly zone in northern Iraq and in the south of the country end forthwith.
- Arab and international airlines to resume regularly scheduled flights to and from Baghdad without seeking the prior agreement of Committee 661.
- The conference calls for a world day of solidarity with the Iraqi people on February 13, every year in memory of the massacre in the ‘Amariyyah shelter in Iraq.
- The conference expressed its thanks to the Middle East Council of Churches for the efforts and services it has expended since 1991, including its relief and development program in Iraq. ... The conference also encourages western delegations to visit Iraq. Finally, the conference urged the General Secretariat

of the Middle East Council of Churches to create a committee to follow up on the above recommendations.

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Donations to save children’s lives in Afghanistan can be made at www.unicef.org.au by clicking on the ‘donate now’ icon or by calling UNICEF Australia’s 24-hour credit card hotline 1 800 025 192.

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According to the UNICEF, one of the most troubling and complex aspects of the spread of HIV/AIDS is its link to the widespread sexual exploitation of children. Children who are forced into the sex trade - estimated to be 1 million every year - are the most vulnerable to contracting and then spreading HIV/AIDS. UNICEF head Carol Bellamy called for more direct action aimed at challenging accepted sexual behaviours, and to protect children from the sex trade to begin with, in their lead up to the 2nd World Congress against Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children, 17 - 20 December 2001 in Yokohama, Japan.