

# Iraq: A prayer for the Dying

by John Schuchardt

The *Interfaith Pilgrimage for Peace and Life* crossed into Iraq from Jordan on February 26, 1995. For ten days we witnessed the suffering of the continuing war against the people of the “cradle of civilization.” We were hosted by the Iraqi government and traveled mainly by bus to many places where we held prayer vigils. Very little walking was done due to the long distances that had to be covered through the Iraqi desert.

A sense of dismay and agonized questioning penetrated our hearts. What does it mean to read in the *Boston Globe* a report from UNICEF that sanctions have now caused the deaths of half a million persons in Iraq? Is there meaning in such information or is it merely a numbing numerical abstraction? Some of the Iraqi people we met expressed confusion and great anger:

We have our dignity and our sovereignty. We are educated and aware people. We know the rich nations are plotting against our natural resources. This attack revealed the imperialist ambitions against the entire region.

Why did you  
do this to us?  
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All we can do  
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—An Iraqi citizen



Photo: Peter Moore

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America wants us to be puppets and we said 'No!' Of course, with a four trillion dollar debt and a \$160 billion annual deficit in trade, the U.S. wants to control the production and price of oil and assert hegemony over Europe and Asia. This war unmasked all this and showed that America is against the poor peoples of the world.

In a Baghdad hospital, I held the withered, cold hands of infants, their eyes wide and hearts beating out the minutes and hours towards a quiet death. I was surprised by the strength of tiny fingers gripping mine. I looked into hurting eyes of mothers—icons of love—sitting in patient vigil. On each bed lay a dying child attended by a grieving mother, suffering together the days and nights of the slow death of sickness and dehydration.

We talked to doctors whose healing hands had no protective gloves, no

anesthetics, no antibiotics—healing hands trained in the best medical schools, but with the most basic means of diagnosis and treatment kept out of reach by United Nations sanctions.

An American mother on the Pilgrimage, seeing for the first time the human face of sanctions, said: “All three of my children would have died if they had not had medical treatment. Is there any greater human rights abuse than to blockade food and medicine to an entire population?” Every person who has seen the human meaning of the word “sanctions” whether in Vietnam, Nicaragua or Cuba, knows how dangerously simplistic it is to execute policies of mass suffering by the choice of the “right” enemy and the “right” word.

We spent one morning in prayer at the Kuwaiti border on the “Highway of Death” where thousands of civilians and soldiers were massacred by U.S. cluster bombs while trying to withdraw from Kuwait. Most of those young men were blown to pieces by the impact of high-tech weapons—death without burial, without ritual of sacrament, sorrow without end. There we tasted the irony of a United Nations helicopter circling over our prayer gathering as we stood on the earth of nations divided for the first time by a UN-sponsored war. We were in the shadow of a new world monument of division, fear and enmity—a ten-foot-wide, twelve-foot-deep trench backed by a hill of earth twenty feet high, stretching across the entire Iraq-Kuwait border. In a landscape made ruin by war, we could only imagine the magnitude of long-term and probably irreversible environmental devastation to Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Iraq, the Persian Gulf and the Earth's atmosphere.

**W**e fasted and prayed for a day in the Amariyah bomb shelter. Hattie Nestel gives a pilgrim's reflection on that experience:

Standing outside the Amariyah shelter—a tomb of unfathomable suffering—I experienced the same raw sense of anguish that I had felt outside the crematoria at Birkenau. The cold, dank concrete still held the screams of victims, mostly women and children. As we were introduced to our guide, my eyes locked on the picture of her daughter, hanging around her neck. She told us her story.

In the middle-class suburb of Baghdad, this underground bunker had been built to protect more than two thousand people. Each evening this fortress provided a sense of security as thousands of U.S. bombs were dropped on the city. The woman's daughter was always among the first in the shelter, saving a bed for her mother. On this particular night the mother decided to stay home to catch up on housework that she had been unable to do because of the heavy bombing all that week. The daughter wanted to stay with her mother, but was told she must go to the shelter for her safety.

When the specially designed U.S. missiles blew a hole in the shelter's seven-foot concrete roof and exploded on target, the doors were sealed shut and the occupants were incinerated or drowned in boiling water from huge storage tanks and water pipes contained there.

The mother, who was our guide through this chamber of death, had gone mad. From the night of the bombing until the present day she has rarely left the ruined shelter. At first, she screamed and wept. Later she experienced rage, then despair. As the clean-up and removal of bodies and debris continued, she wandered the empty underground cavern and communed with her daughter's spirit. Eventually, the Iraqi government erected a small



Photo: John Schuchardt

dwelling at the entrance to the shelter where she could stay. As her health returned, she acted as a guide for those who came to mourn.

We saw photos of the young children who had perished in this shelter built to protect them. Each picture had wreaths and candles surrounding it and the eyes staring out penetrated my raw soul. I could not help but see the eyes of my own children and infant grandchild. How could I follow this woman and not feel her pain as my pain? Later, as I was leaving, she and I embraced. I cried and she comforted me. There were no words, only the embrace and the unbearable pain of two mothers—one whose beloved child's life had been extinguished by the bombs dropped by the country of the other.

Another mother, Nasara, with another soul's cry filled with passion, spoke out: "I hate the words democracy and human rights! I never thought I would say this. But these words are only used as weapons against the Third World. Why isn't there a single standard, instead of one set of rules for the rich countries and a different set of rules for

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Pilgrims walk past school children on the way to Amariyah Shelter.

the little, poor countries?" On June 17, 1993 Nasara saw her close friend, Laila Al-Attar, one of the most beloved artists of the Middle East, carried dead from her home, killed by a U.S. air attack on Baghdad with twenty-three cruise missiles.

As we pilgrims remembered all these events, related through Iraqi eyes and voices, we found it impossible not to feel the enormous vitality and strength of the people of Iraq. They know the depth of their 6000 years of culture and civilization and the long-term measure of human values.

In 1991, a U.S.-led coalition of nations went into the desert during the holy days of prayers and fasting, the season of Ramadhan and Passover and Lent. There they tested their night vision and laser guidance weapons systems, leaving an ancient land and its people devastated and starving. Four years later, a band of pilgrims, of many faiths and nations, went in the same holy season to walk in the desert, to seek, to be tested and to beseech a miracle: we prayed that somehow human hearts in the developed nations would once again be able to feel the pain of those who suffer and that once again human consciences would be given the gift of shame.