

A “Protective Environment” for Children

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In-depth Report: [IRAQ REPORT](#)

The Inter Parliamentary Union and UNICEF have joined forces in an ambitious project to stop violence against children in every country, which is “widespread and under-acknowledged”, according to Toshi Nina, UNICEF Deputy Executive Director. “Governments and parliaments must build a protective environment that allows children to live without threat of abuse and exploitation.”

This, as the children of Iraq and Afghanistan search in rubbish dumps, for food and items to sell; as children barely out of diapers beg in those country’s streets, are raped, driven over and shot by the US and UK military and their militias. Perhaps a good place for UNICEF and the IPU to start, would be to have a word with George W. Bush and Prime Minister Blair and the US and UK Generals.

“Violence perpetrates poverty, illiteracy and early mortality”, IPU President Pier Ferdinando Casini said and “impedes progress towards Millennium Development goalsthe best way to deal with violence is to stop it before it happens”, he concluded. Indeed. Call the Pentagon.

No doubt as the children scavenged (and in Palestine and Lebanon) sumptuous meals were being consumed by the worthy. And do they really comprehend what is needed in the real world? One formerly very senior UN diplomat told me that when he left the UN, he did not know how book an airline ticket. Nurturing certainly flourishes on UN Plaza, but how can those so removed (with honourable, but seemingly few exceptions) relate to the conditions and needs of the planet’s most vulnerable?

Violence takes on many forms. The trauma of years of bombings as Iraq (17 years by the US and UK) and Afghanistan (6 years by the US and UK) of homes now being bombed, bulldozed, walled in, of parents being dragged out in the night by the occupying forces and or their puppet “security”, as their dwellings are trashed and fathers, brothers, uncles, grandfathers pushed or kicked to the ground, hooded, hog tied, snatched, if not worse.

One of the first things the US military did when they arrived in Baghdad was to throw the children out of the orphanages, children who had lost all, kicked from the only safe haven they had. The Qur’an has directions on the tenderness that must nurture orphans and Baghdad’s orphanages were special, in spite of the grinding deprivation of the (UN) embargo.

The staff did all they could to heal terrible psychological and physical wounds. Each child had a searing story locked in their mind, like the child who hid her face when the others gathered, begging to have their photos taken. She had been the only survivor when her home in Kut, south of Baghdad, was bombed during the 1991 Gulf war. Her parents,

brothers and sisters were incinerated in the inferno. Her face was terribly scarred and deformed from the burns – she lived with both mental and physical scars. I suggested to the gentle psychiatrist who ran the home, that I raised funds for her to come to Europe, saying what miracles could be worked now with skin grafts – at least the external scars could be alleviated. “There is no unaffected skin to graft”, she replied. Her little body was seared, literally, from head to toe.

When I visited after the (illegal) 1998 Christmas three day bombing blitz, which Prime Minister Blair announced with triumph in front of the resplendent Downing Street Christmas tree, there was an added trauma for these mites who had suffered so much. They now all slept under their beds. Nothing the staff could say would persuade them to snuggle up on top of them. The Bible-loving Blair should read Matthew (18.6) “Woe to he who causes a little one to stumble. It would be better to tie a millstone round his neck and be sunk to the depths of the sea.”

I had long learned of a poignant visitor to the orphanage (and to the one for boys nearby.) One day the Principal, who had shared many thoughts with me over the years, asked me to walk with her in the garden (a code for “a private talk”.) “He comes here, you know”, she said. It took a moment: “Saddam?” I said. “Yes”, she said. He would turn up, alone, wearing traditional dress, with sweets, toys, books and sit on the floor with the children, entertaining and talking to them. The man who himself had the childhood from hell, relating to and understanding theirs. The child within the man. As he went to his death, I wondered what these young he had mentored and befriended felt – and then I wondered again at the silence of UNICEF when the children were expelled from their only place of safety and succour, without money, with no relatives to go to, to wander Baghdad’s dangerous streets amid the bombs and the chaos and somehow fend for themselves – with no bed to now lie under. Their terror must have been beyond imagination.

UNICEF Baghdad, during the embargo years, was quite an operation, with it’s vast, glass doored building and guards – for which Iraq compulsorily paid. Professor Magne Raundalen, possibly the world’s foremost expert in the trauma of children in war and founder of the Center for Crisis Studies, in Bergen, Norway, persuaded them to found a trauma centre in Baghdad for Iraq’s children, which he had diagnosed as “the most traumatised child population on earth”.

The Centre was a world away from Baghdad’s deprivations. Scandinavian countries had contributed colour, light, toys, resources in all hues and the staff provided a sanctuary for small, damaged psyches – like Ali, who was three years old when he saw his father buried, killed in the 1991 Gulf war. The cemetery was near his house. Day after day he escaped from home and was found at his father’s grave, digging with his hands, saying: “It’s alright, Daddy, you can come out now: the men who have put you there have gone away.”

The psychiatrist and her staff who ran that Centre, said that they were dealing with a level of trauma in which they had no experience and felt they were failing their little patients. When I returned home, I telephoned Professor Raundalen and told him of their concerns. He said he was arranging a Conference in New York for mental health professionals working with children in war zones and would immediately send an invitation to staff at the Centre in Baghdad who wished to attend.

Back in Baghdad, a few months later, I returned to the Centre and asked if the Conference

had been of help. Professor ... (note, even under Saddam one used many, if certainly not all, names; after "liberation" one uses few) took me to her office. A calm, professional woman, she scrambled through her drawers, throwing paper after paper on to her desk. She had received all the exit papers from the relevant Ministries to attend the Conference - and the funding. She had to apply for the US visa through the Head of UNICEF in Baghdad. As the departure time approached, she said, she telephoned daily, to enquire news of the visa. On the day before she was due to leave, she telephoned in desperation. The UNICEF Head in Baghdad responded: "There is no visa, I never applied", she said. Talking with other professionals dealing with such immensities in their child population had been a beacon of hope for her. "I am traumatised now ..." she said, shaking, as I held her.

How inconvenient it would have been to have an articulate child psychiatrist from Baghdad, stand up at a major Conference in New York, with the world's media covering and tell it like it was in Saddam's Iraq: the child trauma led by the USA. So UNICEF, seemingly, blocked her visa.

Professor Raundalen had found what he called a "unique phenomenon", in Iraq. Children who no longer played - play reminded them of their dead friends - and the US/UK bombing continued (illegally, with no UN mandate) year after year. Oh, and UNICEF closed the Centre.

It took Dieter Hannusch of the Rome based World Food Programme - not UNICEF - to write (in 1995) that: "Time is running out for the children of Iraq." It was running out in returning typhoid, cholera and all water born diseases previously eradicated, in stunting and literally starvation at the hands of the UN embargo, with banned importation of equipment to repair, ability to trade.

One year, I was in the UNICEF office seeking a Report they had produced which (finally) I had been told, documented the year by year disaster of the embargo. A woman ran in and thrust a battered note into the Director's hand. Three of her children had died in a week and the last one was now ill, these were the medicines the hospital needed to try to save his life. She was told that UNICEF was not in the business of giving out medicine, but collating statistics of the holocaust that was the embargo, doing surveys.

I was refused the Report and told to try in Jordan. "But it is in the public domain ..." Too bad, it seemed. I tried UNICEF in Jordan, no response. I called UNICEF in London where a concerned press officer promised he would get it and was shocked I had been refused. It arrived two days later in satisfying bulk. I called to thank him profusely. After a long career, his colleagues were shocked to find that for some reason he had been sacked with no notice. Surely a coincidence.

My eternal memory of UNICEF Baghdad is of walking past the glass doors, very early, as the sun rose and reading their mission statement prominently displayed. "Above all" was education, protection and respect for women and children. A small, ragged, shoeless child of no more than seven, was sweeping the steps up to the great doors, leading to the plush interior, a world away from his embargoed life.

Felicity Arbuthnot is a journalist and activist who has visited the Arab and Muslim world on numerous occasions. She has written and broadcast on Iraq, her coverage of which was nominated for several awards. She was also senior researcher for John Pilger's award-winning documentary ["Paying the Price: Killing the Children of Iraq"](#). and [author, with Nikki van der Gaag, of "Baghdad" in the "Great Cities" series, for World Almanac Books \(2006.\)](#)

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