

Iraq: Corruption Eats Into Food Rations

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

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FALLUJAH, May 2 (IPS) – Amidst unemployment and impoverishment, Iraqis now face a cutting down of their monthly food ration – much of it already eaten away by official corruption.

Iraqis survived the sanctions after the first Gulf War (1990) with the support of rations through the Public Distribution System (PDS). The aid was set up in 1995 as part of the UN's Oil-for-Food programme.

The sanctions were devastating nevertheless. Former UN programme head Hans von Sponeck said in 2001 that the sanctions amounted to “a tightening of the rope around the neck of the average Iraqi citizen.” Von Sponeck said the sanctions were causing the death of 150 Iraqi children a day.

Denis Halliday, former UN humanitarian coordinator for Iraq who quit his post in protest against the sanctions, told IPS they had proved “genocidal” for Iraqis.

During more than five years of U.S.-occupation, the situation has become even worse. The rationing system has been crumbling under poor management and corruption.

From the beginning of this year, the rations delivered were reduced from 10 items to five.

“We used the PDS as counter-propaganda against Saddam Hussein's regime before the U.S. occupation of Iraq began in 2003,” Fadhil Jawad of the Dawa Party led by Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki told IPS in Baghdad. “But then we found it necessary to maintain basic support for Iraqi people under occupation. We blamed Saddam for feeding Iraqis like animals with simple rations of food — that we fail to provide now.”

“When the Americans came to occupy Iraq, they promised us a better life,” Ina'm Majeed, a teacher at a girls school told IPS in Fallujah. “After killing our sons and husbands, they are killing us by hunger now. The food ration that was once enough for our survival is now close to nothing, and the market prices are incredibly high. It is impossible for 80 percent of Iraqis now to buy the same items they used to get from the previous regime's food rations.”

Ina'm's husband was killed in a U.S. air strike during the April 2004 siege of her city, leaving her with four children to bring up.

A World Food Programme (WFP) report in May 2006 found that just over four million people in Iraq were “food-insecure and in dire need of different kinds of humanitarian assistance.”

According to the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR) in April 2007, of the four million Iraqis who cannot regularly buy enough to eat, only 60 percent had access to PDS rations.

The situation is worse today.

The former Iraqi ministry of trade used to distribute fair quantities of food in the PDS, then low quality food at the beginning of the UN sanctions. The quantities were reduced after the sanctions lasted longer than the former government expected. After Iraq signed the memo of understanding in 1996 with the UN, the quality and quantity of food notably improved.

“Do not blame Iraqis for calling the sanctions days ‘the good old days’ because they were definitely good compared to the dark days we are living under U.S. occupation,” Abu Aymen, a 45-year-old lawyer with eight children told IPS in Fallujah. “All Iraqis complained about life under Saddam’s regime because it was bad, but it seems that all the good things, little as they were, have been taken away along with his statues.”

Aymen added, “We used to get cheese, powdered milk for us and our children, shaving paste and blades, tomato paste, special food for children, beans, soap and cleaning detergents, and even chicken, as well as basic foods like flour, rice, cooking oil, tea and sugar. Now we get bullets and missiles and polluted food and medicines.”

Haj Chiad, a PDS distribution agent in Fallujah, told IPS that he now also distributes illness.

“I used to deliver food, but now I distribute poison with it,” he said. “It has happened many times during the past four years that the food given to us by the ministry of trade was either rotten or actually poisoned. We distributed rice and sugar from sacks that had been stored a long time in damp places, and tomato paste that was long past its expiry date before we received it.”

The Iraqi parliament’s Committee for Integrity has demanded comprehensive interrogation of minister for trade Abdul Falah al-Sudany for the “vast corruption in his ministry.” But as with other complaints of corruption, Maliki has taken no action.

Ali al Fadhily, IPS correspondent in Baghdad, works in close collaboration with Dahr Jamail, our U.S.-based specialist writer on Iraq who has reported extensively from Iraq and the Middle East.

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