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Sanctions make life a living hell for young Iraqis

Aishah Ali

"BEFORE the embargo we lived in heaven, but today we live in hell," says 22-year-old Mohamed Ali Hussein when asked how the economic sanctions have affected young people like him.

"Things used to be cheaper. You could get a good pair of jeans from the Mall for US\$40 (RM152) when it costs double that amount in Paris. Our government helped us because our economy was strong.

"But now you can't get anything; no cinemas, no discotheques, no holidays. My parents used to take us to Europe every year, but it's out of the question now."

Still, Mohamed is luckier than most of his peers. His parents who run a jewellery and souvenir shop in Baghdad can still afford to send him to college, which cost US\$45 a year.

He studies computer and is convinced that if sanctions are lifted, Iraq can regain its former glory within a year. "We have all the experts," he says confidently.

"People my age have nothing to look forward to now. The sanctions have killed our minds. If you talk to college students, you'll see that they don't behave their age. They don't laugh."

"We cannot be happy. Before, school used to be fun. Everything was free - fees, books, stationery. Some schools even give their students food. But now even pencils are forbidden."

Mohamed's views, to some extent, confirm fears that the sanctions have extracted a high price from young people. A whole new generation has grown up in appalling conditions for almost 10 years now and this has adversely affected their physical and mental growth.

An increasing number of youths are being treated for depression and the number of school dropouts is alarming.

With the comprehensive economic sanctions imposed on Iraq by the United Nations after its invasion of Kuwait in 1990, the country has deteriorated from a prosperous economy that once boasted of the highest living standards in the Middle East.

Since then, people have had to cope with little food, poor healthcare, lack of clean water and sanitation. Children suffer from malnutrition and are dying from diarrhoeal and respiratory infections. For the first time in years doctors are faced with third-world health problems like cholera and diphtheria. To date 500,000 children have died, according to a World Health Organisation report.

This and a myriad other problems have forced the UN Humanitarian Coordinator for Iraq, Hans von Sponeck to resign. He condemned the sanctions as "a true human tragedy that must be ended."

Sponeck left Baghdad late March, in time to meet and brief a delegation of Malaysian women NGOs who came to Iraq to see the situation for themselves.

The group of 11 led by Datuk Seri Dr Siti Hasmah Mohd Ali comprise of Bakti (association of ministers' wives) members and women representing various fields of health, academia, communications and social activism.

Apart from Dr Siti Hasmah, the delegation was made up of Toh Puan Dr Aishah Ong, Datuk Raj Karim, Datuk Paduka Ruby Lee, Prof Datin Dr Sharifah Hafsah Syed Shahabuddin, Datin Siti Aishah Ghazali, Assoc Prof Dr Rashidah Shuib, Datin Noorhayati Kamaluddin, Datin Dr Mizan Adiliah Ahmad Ibrahim, Dr Gladys Lopez and the writer.

They visited hospitals, schools, orphanage, old folks home and held discussions with the Iraqi Women's Federation, the Red Crescent, Family Planning Associations and UN agencies.

During the five-day visit to Baghdad, two of them taken up by the 10-hour drive by road from Amman, the women saw the devastations the sanctions have caused the people.

THROUGH discussions held with doctors and humanitarian officials, they concur that the sanctions have missed its target and that vulnerable groups like women, children and the elderly have become innocent victims.

Dr Siti Hasmah said she was encouraged to make the trip by her husband, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad who suggested she brought along a group of women NGOs.

"I must stress that our objective is purely humanitarian and I chose a team who went on this mission as wives, mothers, professionals and social activists. As such they can empathise and spread the word, as these women participate regularly at world conferences as well as in Malaysia."

The group's mission in Iraq was appreciated by President Saddam Hussein who invited Dr Siti Hasmah to his palace for an audience. The president thanked Malaysians and Dr Mahathir for their concern.

Dr Siti Hasmah also paid a courtesy call on vice-President Taha Ramadhan and Deputy Prime Minister Tariq Aziz on the first day of the visit.

Taha Yassin told her that to two things would be apparent to the Malaysian delegates. The first is the injustice done to Iraq by the "so-called" human rights advocates, (Americans) and the second, the resilience the Iraqi people have shown to rebuild and find alternatives to what's been destroyed.

Tariq Aziz said the strength of the Iraqi people lie in their pride. "Iraq is a traditionally strong nation and people are morally equipped to resist the sanctions."

The question is, for how long? How long should the Iraqi people be punished? And what will it take before the rest of the world realise that they have turned their backs on the sufferings of the young and innocent?

The group of Malaysian women does not pretend it can move mountains. To begin with, they did not come with the intention and resources to conduct a scientific and thorough study on the situation.

All the evidence they gathered were mostly anecdotal. What they saw and heard was enough to confirm reports already compiled by UN agencies and other humanitarian missions.

The doctors in the group were most concerned about the lack of medicine, life-saving drugs and basic equipments like oxygen and incubators in many hospitals.

"Imagine, the doctors here haven't even heard of third-generation antibiotics," says Dr Sharifah Hafsah Syed Shahabuddin, Head of Medical Studies at UKM and vice-president of National Council of Women's Organisations.

Maternal morality has increased 10-fold in the last 10 years. Many pregnant women suffer from anaemia and get into complications like post-partum haemorrhage.

"There are not even enough blood bags and proper drugs to help women who may have problems during delivery," says Raj Karim, the International Planned Parenthood Federation president.

In most schools, children are lucky if they had desks and blackboards.

But more disturbing is the growing number of young people who have rejected school saying that "school does not give us money to live".

A March 1999 United Nations Children's Fund survey cited a 13.9 per cent drop in primary school enrolment and a 14.7 per cent drop in Iraq's vocational preparatory school.

It was also pointed out that in Iraq today, many young people cannot find jobs in the professions they have been trained. Another sad fact is that many of them are postponing marriage as they cannot afford it.

The Unicef representative in Iraq, Anupama Rao Singh warns that the failure to pay adequate attention to Iraq's youth could lead to even greater instability and danger later on.

These last six years have been miserable for all families, says Dr Azar al-Shama, a psychiatrist. Unicef data shows that outpatient mental health treatment more than doubled.

The psychiatrist sees 40 per cent more young people than she did before the sanctions. "Parents are not around as much. Children's personalities suffer. They watch their parents searching for food, medicines and clothes.

So, it is hardly surprising when Mohamed says his friends have forgotten to laugh.