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Iraq-Sanctions

EX-UN OFFICIAL APPEALS FOR LIFTING OF SANCTIONS ON IRAQ

By: Kuzaimah Idris

KUALA LUMPUR, Jan 28 (Bernama) -- A former United Nations Humanitarian Coordinator to Iraq has made an impassioned plea to the international community to lift sanctions on the embattled nation, saying sanctions have failed and are punishing the wrong target.

Hans Von Sponeck said that for humanitarian reasons, the international community could not afford to "wait another day" to make progress in resolving the issue as sanctions had only brought untold sufferings to the innocent civilian Iraqi population.

"The continuation of this linkage between disarmament and economic sanctions is a policy which punishes the wrong target. We have over the past 10 years been seeing more and more evidence that the real victims of sanctions are particularly the children of Iraq, he told Bernama in an interview here.

Von Sponeck was in Malaysia earlier this week at the invitation of the Pan Pacific and South East Asia Women's Association of Malaysia patron, Datin Seri Dr Siti Hasmah Mohamed Ali. He gave talks on Monday during a public forum organised by the association on the effects of the UN sanctions on Iraqi women and children.

Von Sponeck, a German career UN official in charge of the UN oil-for-food programme introduced in 1996 to allow Iraq to trade oil for basic supplies, asked to be relieved of his duties in March last year, saying the programme had failed to meet the humanitarian needs of Iraq's 22 million people.

Since his resignation, Von Sponeck who has 30 years' experience in the UN Development Programme, has toured 15 countries where he spoke out against the economic sanctions.

Von Sponeck's predecessor, Dennis Halliday, also left his post in mid-1998 after voicing similar opposition to sanctions imposed on Iraq on Aug 2 1990 after its invasion of neighbouring Kuwait.

Asked whether his colleagues from other UN agencies shared his views with regards to the sanctions, he said: "Emotionally they feel the same but for various reasons and other considerations, they are not ready to aggressively take the same stand as I do".

UN sanctions prohibit the export of oil products from Iraq, and the sale and supply of all products, including weapons and other military equipment as well as the transfer of funds, to Iraq.

Von Sponeck said the mortality rate among Iraq children had more than doubled since sanctions were imposed with 50,000 deaths per year, and 142 children reported dead daily.

"The diseases such as cholera, typhoid, pneumonia and chronic malnutrition are the major killers of children under-five, this is reality and if knowing this you continue with the same policy, you become culpable, you become accusable of being responsible for the the causes that lead to illness and death,"he said.

The unemployment has reached between 60 and 75 per cent mainly because almost all factories are closed.

"I am not an apologist for the Iraqi government but it is clear and is shown in reports and I have myself seen it in Iraq during my 17 months I have lived there that things that have been forgotten in Iraq have become a matter of life and death for the civilian population," he said.

Von Sponeck, who took up the job in September 1998 and stayed in

Baghdad during the bombing of Iraq led by the United States and Britain in December that year, also spoke of Malaysia's international role in helping to end the sanctions.

"I must say that during the time I served in Baghdad, Malaysia's very constructive role in trying to bring better awareness about the realities in Iraq to the international community was most impressive," he said.

"Me and my colleagues in Baghdad always praised Malaysia for its courageous stand and Malaysia is the only non-permanent member of the UN Security Council that has this courage. My hope is that now that Malaysia has left the Security Council, the Malaysian voice will continue to be heard loud and clear as a contribution to efforts in which I am also engaged in, to end a faulty policy," he added.

"The policy has to change for two reasons, first is that people suffer and second equally important in the long run is that international law is being violated. These are the two reasons that motivate me to travel, to give my time and hope that governments and the public would increasingly see that I have a point, that my predecessors have a point".

He said that without any United Nations Security Council mandate and without any legal basis, the awareness created by people like him had contributed to create a condition under which the British Government was now more willing to rethink its approach.

"The hope that one has, that I have is that the incoming U.S. administration will be very careful before it tightens its position on Iraq. It should get briefings from everybody so that there is a good understanding of all facets of this very complicated Iraq picture," he said.

Asked whether Iraq had met its obligations to the UN to enable the UN to lift the sanctions, Von Sponeck said: "Iraq has complied in many ways, the problem is with the resolution which is not clear in its text and therefore subject to interpretation".

"This is most unfortunate...there should have been a much cleaner, tighter and transparent language to decide in clear terms whether Iraq has complied or not".

Von Sponeck called for dialogues among all parties to find a way out of this "tragic human reality" in Iraq and not just hiding behind a smoke-screen.

On the oil-for-food programme, he said although the programme was an important lifeline for the Iraqi civilian population, it was still inadequate and could not possibly meet the needs of the Iraqi population.

"The Iraqis are getting US\$100 of humanitarian supply per person each year (from the oil-for-food programme), that is all the Iraqis have. I think that alone is the figure which should shake the members of the Security Council very severely and make them rethink whether this is really the approach that the international community should pursue in solving the crisis," he said.

"I told Malaysian Prime Minister (Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad), if there is another Malaysian visit to Iraq, get a good number of Malaysian students to go and meet with Iraqis, not at the political level but the human level to make others realise what it means to lead that kind of life".

With the reopening of the newly-refurbished Saddam International Airport in Baghdad four months ago, Von Sponeck said:"The finest thing that I could see now is the Malaysian planes fly to Baghdad, there are over 100 planes that have landed".

He said a French technical team sent to Iraq last September had certified that the airport was meeting international standards, adding that the Iraqis were trying to maintain the airport and that things were

working.

Asked whether the Iraqi people regarded him as a saviour, he said : "I don't want to be a fanatic. I want to be seen as an international servant who wants to raise awareness about the implications of the wrong policy, the impact of the wrong policy and the implications of pursuing year after year a wrong policy".

"Even if it means the American will say this man is an idiot of the Baghdad government, a useful fool that the Iraqi is using, that would be a terrible and wrongly perceived, because I'm not".

Is his life in any danger for campaigning against the UN sanctions?

With a smile, he responded: "Yes but I don't care, I'm not afraid. I'm a very powerful role model, my father was executed because he stood up against Hitler, I learned from him".

General Hans Von Sponeck (same name as him) was jailed in 1942 for disobeying Hitler's orders and withdrawing 120,000 soldiers from Russia. He later took part in the failed 1944 plot to kill Hitler, for which he was executed.

Von Sponeck said he was only five years old when his father was shot.

"I still remember and to cope with it, I had a mother who kept reminding me that honesty lasts longer, it becomes a symbol," he added.

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