

Submission by Save the Children UK to the International Development Select Committee

Preparing for the humanitarian consequences of possible military action against Iraq

1. Save the Children UK (SC UK) has worked in Iraq since the end of the Gulf War. We work in the Kurdish Northern Governorates (Iraqi Kurdistan) and implement reconstruction and development work. We currently employ a total of 60 national staff, and have one expatriate post. Our programme works entirely through national partners. SC UK is recognised as the leading international NGO (INGO) working in North Iraq, both from the point of view of operational capacity and analysis.
2. Based on our experience in North Iraq, SC UK is deeply concerned about the consequences of military action in Iraq. Our assessment is that war would cut a lifeline that, as indicated below, barely sustains the Iraqi people at present and that the international community would be unable to cope with the scale of such a humanitarian emergency.
3. For a number of years, SC UK has been calling on the UN Security Council and the Government of Iraq to act upon their joint responsibility to improve the design and implementation of the Oil For Food Programme (OFFP), and thereby mitigate the vulnerability of the Iraqi population. Recently the situation has been gradually improving but much more still needs to be done to reduce entrenched poverty and dependence.
4. Conflict in Iraq would not only reverse the recent positive trends but would almost certainly cause the breakdown of the existing infrastructure of support, leaving millions of Iraqis entirely dependent on external aid with even less security than the current assistance they receive through OFFP.
5. At present, there is no funding, and little preparedness planning or overall co-ordination, for such a scenario. SC UK knows from experience that only detailed advance planning, combined with good co-ordination and information sharing, can avoid wasteful duplication and gaps in emergency response. Furthermore, it seems evident that neither the UN nor military actors will be able to appropriately respond alone to the scale of humanitarian needs. It is therefore of considerable concern that guarantees have not been given to humanitarian actors about future access to populations in need or about the maintenance of the independence and impartiality of humanitarian actors – and thus of their ability to operate.

The Situation of Children in North Iraq

6. Children's rights in North Iraq have been set back by the impact of decades of conflict, under-investment and poverty. After the death and destruction visited upon the region in 1991, Iraqi Kurds suffered from a double embargo under both UN sanctions on Iraq and an internal blockade on goods from Centre/South Iraq destined for North Iraq. During 1994-1998, internal conflict among Kurdish factions led to large population movements and Islamic insurgents have once again brought insecurity to parts of Suleimaniyah Governorate since the summer of 2001. The region is protected internationally but its authorities have little decision-making power or

ability to improve children's lives. Most revenue of the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) is derived from taxing the diesel trade to Turkey which has recently resumed.

7. Kurdish Iraqis survive on UN assistance, meagre public sector salaries and illegal trade (mainly smuggled goods – cigarettes, alcohol, electronic goods and auto parts – from Turkey, Iran and Baghdad-controlled Iraq). The UN provides houses for internally displaced persons (IDPs), distributes mechanical and other farm inputs, sustains the supply and distribution of medical and food items, builds schools and roads, clears mines and sets up wells, generators and electricity lines.
8. The majority of Kurdish households remain too poor to buy locally produced poultry, fish or meat and have to rely on the imported food-ration and medical supplies, both of which arrive in transit through Baghdad. Recently pulses, the main source of protein, have been scarce in the food ration under OFFP and hard to find in the local markets, where poor families have been forced to sell a portion of their rations in order to afford other essentials. Food staples sold in Kurdish Iraqi markets largely consists of resold food rations. 70 per cent of Iraqi Kurdish society is urbanised, with little or no access to home grown food supplies.
9. In winter, temperatures in North Iraq range between -5 and +5 degrees Celsius, with heavy snowfalls in the mountain ranges spanning Iraq's northern international borders. Even in the summer, a dilapidated communication and transport infrastructure is a major obstacle to accessing services and the distribution of goods – especially for rural populations. According to a recent FAO survey, 70 per cent of villages are 4 km from a paved road and 25 km from district towns with secondary education and medical facilities.
10. As a result of these multiple problems, child mortality and morbidity figures in North Iraq remain a cause for concern. Recent improvements have resulted from the introduction of the OFFP its subsequent enhancement (such as the cash component), complemented by the work of UN agencies and the presence of a small number of international NGOs. For their survival, Kurdish children depend on all these programmes to run efficiently with sufficient funding, regular supplies, professional staff and efficient distribution.
11. More recently, public sector salaries have been cut in some sectors and fuel imports from Centre/South Iraq have been curtailed causing prices to rise rapidly. In the event of conflict it is hard to see how families can continue to survive for more than a few weeks without OFFP handouts and associated services.

Emergency Preparedness

12. SC UK has no knowledge of overall UK Government contingency plans for humanitarian assistance during and after a conflict with Iraq. However, DfID recently called a meeting with UK NGOs already working in, or interested in future work in, Iraq. The NGOs have undertaken to prepare a co-ordinated response to DfID outlining their capacity to respond and their need for funding and support in co-ordinating planning.
13. SC UK is in regular informal contact with DfID over the use of an existing £60,000 budget line for emergency preparedness (for droughts, harsh winters and other disasters) embedded in the current £2.7m development grant to SC UK agreed in 2000. SC UK advocated for such preparedness measures after the region experienced conflict in 1991, internal fighting in 1996, repeated harsh winters and three years of drought in the region 1999-2001. Under this grant, SC UK has undertaken a range of activities towards improving emergency preparedness. These include the setting up of Emergency Co-ordination Local Response Committees, which

are designed to bring together the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) representatives, local authorities, INGOs, UN agencies, and local NGOs. These Committees are however non-functional at present, due to a lack of pro-active engagement and differing political agendas. As a result, there is no functioning co-ordinated emergency preparedness in North Iraq.

14. In January 2002, SC UK published the findings of its Household Economy Approach study detailing the levels of poverty and food ration dependency and thus the vulnerability of the Kurdish population in North Iraq to external shock. Since the summer of 2002 SC UK has, in response to the findings of the study and a changing political situation, included specific preparations for armed conflict in its own plans to address humanitarian needs arising from external shock. These include provisions for the survival of displaced persons and capacity-building measures to ensure particular attention is paid to child protection. SC UK's emergency advisers have repeatedly visited the region and conducted assessments and training and carried out logistical preparations together with local staff. However, due to resource limitations, no additional staff members have yet been hired to supplement the existing staff in preparation for dealing with the humanitarian consequences of any military action.
15. SC UK is thus one of two INGOs in North Iraq¹ that have been able to systematically address and carry out emergency preparedness measures. Our strategy is to maintain our normal programme to the extent possible and switch staff and partners to addressing emergency needs as required and as allowed by security considerations and humanitarian access. The £60,000 emergency preparedness budget line mentioned above has been used to purchase supplies and put in place distribution logistics sufficient for 2,000 displaced families.
16. SC UK's local staff are Kurdish. They form a strong and committed team with an exceedingly good understanding of relief and development issues. Many have lived and worked in the Centre/South. We anticipate that, if and when conditions allow, they will extend their activities to the northern areas of the Centre/South and might also form the core of a national team to be based in Baghdad.
17. SC UK is a member of the International Save the Children Alliance, which has adopted a regional response plan. However, no agreements have been signed with other governments in the region or with UN agencies, specifying the terms of reference of Save the Children's response. This would require clear UN leadership in co-ordinating funding and preparedness.
18. Ministries in both KRG administrations seem ill-prepared for addressing emergency needs. Repeated demands on INGO funding, technical input, and planning advice have been made. On inspection, sites identified by the authorities for IDP camps still remain empty fields. The internal co-ordination between ministries leaves a lot to be desired.
19. Co-ordination between the two Kurdish parties cannot be taken for granted in the event of a disruption to the current humanitarian and political situation. Both parties appear to place great store in some prospective military actors' ability to afford protection and humanitarian relief. At the same time, other potential parties, such as the Turkish military forces, to a possible military conflict in North Iraq are viewed with profound suspicion, which would preclude any effective co-operation on emergency response.
20. UN agencies on the ground have been required to develop their own contingency plans without the involvement of KRG or INGO participation. WFP retains significant control over food ration distribution in North Iraq, but only in planning, warehousing and oversight (although WFP warehouses are poorly guarded). The actual distribution and registration (ration card) process

¹ The other is Peace Winds Japan.

is carried out in co-operation with Kurdish Ministries of Trade and individual municipalities. A non-registered family receives one monthly food ration and usually manages to register within two weeks if all documentation is duly received and processed. This process applies to new-borns, deaths, marriages, divorces and 'translocations'.

Finance for Humanitarian Needs

21. Per capita aid levels to Iraq in the last decade have been extremely low. The UK Government, for example, has only contributed around £115 million since the Gulf War in 1991.² Since its start six years ago the OFFP has delivered less than 50 cents (US) of imported material supplies per capita per day to the Iraqi population.
22. The OFFP Distribution Plan for the current 6-month phase ending June 2003 foresees a total of \$4.93 billion, of which \$1.27 billion (~\$200 million/ per month) alone is needed to maintain food security in Iraq. The programme is affected by cumulative funding shortfalls, excluding the food sector, of \$4.5 billion, while a substantially smaller amount remains unspent. The continuation of the OFFP is predicated on continued Iraqi oil liftings, revenue generation and supply of goods. This process involves a number of key Baghdad ministries in addition to the Central Bank of Iraq. Any change to this process would need a Security Council Resolution and acceptance by relevant Iraqi interlocutors.
23. Furthermore, Iraq will enter any post sanctions era with vast external claims on its financial resources: over \$100 billion of foreign debt; over \$200 billion of Gulf war compensation claims; and \$100 billion of claims by Iran for its war losses. If to this bill of \$400 billion were to be added the replacement cost of infrastructure and other assets destroyed in the course of the Gulf war³, we would arrive at a figure of financial requirements which is far beyond the capacity of the Iraqi oil sector to generate.⁴

Consequences of Conflict

24. The withdrawal of UN staff and salaries will immediately affect how the rural economy and urban infrastructure operates. There will be an immediate decline in local cash resources as a result of this and the impact of border closures on illegal trade. The situation will be further complicated by limited access by relief agencies and additional burdens resulting from likely IDP influxes from Kirkuk, Mosul, and other areas. All this will mean that the region will be on the brink of crisis until the summer harvest and economic aid can reach it.
25. The survival of many Iraqi Kurdish children will be in grave doubt if they themselves are forced to flee an attack or have to survive the complete breakdown of the food and health systems. INGOs, the UN and local authorities would find it very challenging to meet their needs even in a favourable security environment.
26. SC UK, with a staff of 60, considers that it could only operate effectively if the following conditions could be satisfied (an assessment is made against each item of the likelihood of these conditions obtaining):

² Evidence submitted by the Secretary of State, the Rt.Hon. Clare Short, to this Committee.

³ The cost of simply rehabilitating key humanitarian sectors to minimal standards after the war in 1991 was estimated at \$6.8 billion for one year alone. Source: Report of the UN S-G's Executive Delegate Sadruddin Aga Khan, July 1991.

⁴ Abbas Alnasrawi, *Oil, Sanctions, Debt and the Future*, Conference Paper, 2001. Abbas Alnasrawi is Professor of Economics at the University of Vermont. Available at <http://www.casi.org.uk/info/alnasrawi.html>

- There is no attack, conventional or chemical, on North Iraq; *Uncertain*.
 - Expatriates or Kurdish NGO staff are not the target of isolated reprisal attacks; *High Risk*.
 - Security allows for travel on roads by car; *Possibly with armed guards – not by night/ limited radius*.
 - Roads are in reasonable condition; *Uncertain – Allied forces use; winter; bombing*.
 - Radio, telephone and satellite communications function to some degree; *Unlikely in the immediate aftermath of military operations commencing and uncertain thereafter*.
 - There are substantial funds available for an emergency response; *No funds currently available*.
 - Cash in some currency (e.g. the US \$) can be readily spent locally, at least for supplies and salaries; *Difficult to assess because of steep dollar inflation and convertibility problems*.
 - Non-food items can be bought locally or trucked in through Turkey or Iran; *Highly unlikely in the first weeks, unimpeded access doubtful in longer term*.
 - There is fuel for trucks, cars and generators; *No storage, shortages likely*.
 - There is agreement with those in effective control over the region on the independence and impartiality of SC UK's operations; *May differ according to area – unlikely in Kirkuk*.
 - Local authorities and populations in need agree to work in partnership with us; *Highly likely*.
 - Information sharing for rapid needs assessments and response takes place between INGOs, UN agencies, KRG ministries, and local authorities; *Capacity constraints, poor history*.
27. This long list assumes, of course, that humanitarian needs do not begin to outstrip the collective capacity to respond. An inflow of large numbers of displaced persons from Centre/South would put significant pressure on that capacity, especially as such people could not be absorbed into existing communities. Equally, a prolonged absence of the food ration, an inability to distribute to remote communities or the outbreak of disease, such as measles, in crowded conditions with concomitant breakdown in electricity and sanitation facilities would add dramatically to the need for assistance. Most generators have little fuel reserves and Dohuk governorate relies on Centre/South Iraq for electricity.
28. The population of North Iraq has vivid memories of the events in 1987-89 (Anfal and Halabja), 1991 (ruthless Iraqi action against the Kurdish uprising) and 1996 (Government of Iraq intervention at the invitation of Kurdistan Democratic Party and the ensuing two years of civil war between the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan and the KDP) as well as the decades of sporadic conflict before. Rumour and isolated reports of bombing or fighting could lead to a mass exodus to the countryside and international borders, especially if such incidents involve the use of non-conventional weapons. Families will be at very high risk after they flee their homes. Children could be killed or maimed by landmines if they are trapped at international borders and prevented from seeking safety and refuge. The borders with Iran and Turkey are some of the most heavily mined areas in the world.
29. In the course of an invasion and its aftermath, internal disagreement over such matters as international funding or the Kurdish share in Iraq's oil revenue, disputes over Kurdish-populated Iraqi territory – including those parts not currently under Kurdish control (e.g. oil rich Kirkuk) – or over the region's political status or the use of proxy forces, and, finally, international abandonment could all prevent a concerted response from taking shape in North Iraq. Any combination of these factors could forestall an effort to co-ordinate a joint emergency response and to lay plans for the subsequent recovery of this region.

Humanitarian-Military Relations

30. Impartial humanitarian access to endangered populations is paramount to saving lives. It is not negotiable as a political or military tool. Humanitarian agencies must be able to operate impartially and independently, responding on the basis of need alone.
31. The state or non-state actors controlling access must ensure that:
- humanitarian agencies are allowed safe access to all populations at risk and in need;
 - borders are open to receive refugees in accordance with international law;
 - all populations are allowed safe access to seek and receive assistance;
 - refugee and IDP camps remain under civilian control;
 - populations seeking refuge are not forcibly detained in camps.
32. SC UK has real concerns that political and military leaders are expecting that humanitarian action in Iraq will be an integrated part of the war effort and subsumed under military control. By definition, military actors cannot deliver impartial humanitarian assistance on the basis of need when they are fighting a war. When parties to a conflict engage with civilians in a combat context, through any range of activities, including delivery of relief supplies, they are using the civilian population to achieve their military aims.
33. Humanitarian agencies can only engage with warring parties according to tightly defined parameters, maintaining distance and neutrality. Humanitarian agencies must engage according to the same rules with all parties, otherwise humanitarian actors will immediately lose their neutrality and legitimise one or the other of the parties.

Conclusion

34. SC UK is deeply concerned at the possibility of renewed and intensified armed conflict in Iraq. In the event that North Iraq becomes embroiled in hostilities, the consequences could be disastrous. Thousands might flee and millions would be in need. Many could die from the fighting and from an inability to survive on their own, particularly if they are out of the reach of relief agencies. The fragile gains in the humanitarian situation achieved in recent years could be erased for years to come.
35. Even if there were to be no military action against Iraq or a direct attack on North Iraq in the event of a conflict, Kurdish children and their families would still face the collapse of an already stressed economy. In the short term, all food, fuel and medical needs would have to be met externally. Income levels would drastically decline for the foreseeable future, further undermining local markets. Children could become subject to abuse and exploitation, such as using them as smugglers, which is already occurring across the Kurdish-Iraqi internal line of control.
36. In North Iraq, it is imperative that Kurdish Iraqi children are protected against any physical or psychological harm and that their rights to basic services are safeguarded by all actors. The UN has a clear protection mandate and should have a leading role in humanitarian activities under terms negotiated with local authorities and parties in control over the population.
37. SC UK believes that the choice for the UK and other governments is not between sanctions and war, but between policies that kill innocent Iraqi civilians and those that protect them. We believe it is the legal and moral duty of members of the UN Security Council to channel maximum effort towards a peaceful resolution of the current crisis.

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