

Save the Children UK

The Humanitarian Implications of Military Action against Iraq

Position:

Save the Children UK is deeply concerned at the possibility of renewed and intensified armed conflict in Iraq because of the inevitably very serious humanitarian consequences this would have for vulnerable children.

Save the Children UK is in no doubt that large-scale military intervention would greatly exacerbate the humanitarian crisis in Iraq, casting serious doubt on the wisdom of such an endeavour.

In the light of the current humanitarian crisis in Iraq and the potentially disastrous humanitarian consequences of military intervention, Save the Children UK urges the UK Government, the Government of Iraq and other members of the international community to continue all efforts towards resolving the current impasse and improving the humanitarian situation of children in Iraq in line with existing expert recommendations.

Past and current situation:

Widespread suffering by the civilian population, especially of its children, is already prevalent throughout Iraq. UNICEF reports that over one in every five children is chronically malnourished and one in three girls does not attend primary school due to deepening poverty and a lack of schools. Iraqi children are forced to drink water which in up to 40% of sample cases contains up to ten times the acceptable level of contamination. Children under 14 make up almost half of Iraqi society.

After twelve years of sanctions, the Iraqi civilian population is highly vulnerable to external shocks that impact on food supplies and basic service provision. Both rely on open borders, functioning infrastructure and efficacious management. Local markets have been critically undermined by centralised distributions during 12 years of sanctions and cannot be relied upon to supply vulnerable children with goods and services if the humanitarian programme is interrupted during or after conflict. Despite the short duration of the Gulf war in 1991, destruction of infrastructure, coupled with supply shortages due to sanctions, caused heavy suffering amongst the population.

Who is vulnerable?

Within this population children are particularly vulnerable, as are the internally displaced, widows, the elderly and the poor. The number of displaced persons is currently between 700,000 and 1,000,000, and will almost certainly increase in the event of conflict. These groups are vulnerable due to their limited capacity to cope with additional hardship. They are generally poor and have little political voice in the distribution of resources.

How will military action affect them?

Three things resulting directly from military action will dangerously undermine the livelihoods and the very survival of Iraqi civilians.

First, supplies of humanitarian goods imported under the UN Oil-for-Food programme (OFF) will be interrupted. Neighbouring states may close their borders, UN agency, international and local aid staff will evacuate their posts, and local authorities may obstruct or be unable to deliver supplies to the needy.

Second, armed conflict is likely to encompass centres of high population density and affect key aspects of their infrastructure. Power cuts and closure of transport routes leading to public health hazards can endanger the lives of large numbers of Iraqis in the medium term.

Third, a breakdown in communications and logistics in the Iraqi civil administration will leave civilians without access to centrally warehoused supplies and hamper distribution.

Indirect implications of military intervention include significantly reduced revenues earned from illegal border trade. Both the government in Baghdad and the Kurdish Administrations rely on this trade for the maintenance of basic service provision and for paying public employees. Inflation will have a further detrimental effect on people's purchasing power as food and other items become scarce.

Which areas will be affected?

Food:

A Save the Children UK study (*Understanding Kurdish Livelihoods in Northern Iraq*, January 2002) found that in better-placed northern Iraq nearly two thirds of the entire population depended on imported food rations. Access to imported food resources is likely to be severely reduced during conflict throughout Iraq, because the centrally stored food ration will almost certainly face supply and distribution difficulties. Northern Iraq further depends on monthly supplies of imported food from the Centre / South, which has been cut off in previous periods of conflict. The requisite income to purchase locally available food in the markets will not suffice for vulnerable groups. Reliance on local food supplies as the sole source of food will be insufficient, depending on the volume of the harvest and the timing of the attacks. Local food supplies provide inadequate nutrition and are currently used to

supplement imported staples. Furthermore, warehouses may be subject to looting and food is likely to be redirected to military needs at a time of conflict.

Health:

Apart from nutritional aspects, the health of the population depends in part on supplies of medicines and equipment procured under the Oil-for-Food Programme, thus interruption in supplies will almost certainly cause dramatic suffering in affected persons. Medical supplies in Iraq are already understocked, even in northern Iraq where the UN is responsible. Hospitals and water and sanitation facilities depend on adequate electrical supplies which now do not meet minimum requirements and are likely to be further damaged and interrupted during conflict.

Further contingencies:

On the one hand, the historical divisions between different parts of the Iraqi population and the central government - as well as between different groups - are likely to aggravate civilian suffering by disputes over resources critical to civilians. On the other hand, there is a real danger that foreign military intervention that is designed to topple the regime in Baghdad will increase the likelihood that this regime will again use crude biochemical weapons; such action further risks embroiling the region in retaliatory use of weapons of mass destruction that will affect large numbers of civilians.

Diplomatic solutions:

Options to attempt to resolve differences at the United Nations through political dialogue around the sanctions regime and the issue of weapons inspections still remain. These options include the potential for agreement on key humanitarian issues - such as financing for development - and discussions around the security issue of weapons inspections - such as their conditionality. These options have not been followed through with adequate determination. As a permanent member of the Security Council, the UK Government should vigorously pursue such initiatives before considering military action, which must always remain a last resort. It is the legal and moral duty of the members of the Security Council to invest all their efforts towards a peaceful resolution of the issue of weapons inspections and of the continuing humanitarian crisis. As Tony Blair said in 1999, all diplomatic options must have been exhausted before military action can be considered.

Aspects of international law:

Save the Children UK is clear that international law is the framework through which these issues should be resolved. The United Nations Security Council is the most appropriate body to ascertain whether a threat to international peace and security emanates from Iraq, whether the current Iraqi government is a perpetrator of this, and what the appropriate response should be. We note that, as yet, no evidence justifying the use of force for purposes of self-defence has been presented to the public.

Based on its eleven-year experience in northern Iraq Save the Children UK maintains that military intervention in Iraq could significantly increase the civilian suffering of the majority of Iraqis, almost half of whom are children under the age of 14. The livelihoods and lives of the most vulnerable Iraqis could be critically endangered. International law requires that warfare is never indiscriminate and disproportional. Damage to civilians and civilian objects must be minimised and can never be in excess of the military advantage gained. Attacking, destroying, removing or rendering useless infrastructure and facilities on which large numbers of civilians currently depend for their very survival would fail this test of distinction and proportionality. International law further affords civilians protection and obligates the parties to the conflict to provide adequate food and medicine. Undermining food security through the interruption of supplies, border closures or disabling local transportation and distribution mechanisms (whether these consequences were intended or not) would deny children further their right to be protected.