

Sanctions and suffering

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The United Nations inspection team, which has resumed its work in Iraq, offers the best way of curtailing Saddam Hussein's weapons program. In its seven years of operation, the UN Special Commission (UNSCOM) has reportedly destroyed over 40,000 chemical weapons, 700 tons of chemical weapons agents, 48 missiles and 30 warheads.

President Clinton was well aware of this when he canceled a threatened air strike on November 15. Though a military attack would demonstrate the resolve of the U.S. and its allies in enforcing the sanctions on Iraq, it would be less effective than UNSCOM in uncovering and destroying Iraq's weapons. Since a military strike is also bound to cause civilian casualties, create dissension in the UN Security Council, and undermine U.S. relations with Arab countries--and do nothing, meanwhile, to dislodge Hussein--it is not an option that has much to recommend it.

In any case, few doubt that there are more dangerous weapons to uncover in Iraq. Apparently UNSCOM was closing in on a biological weapons complex last year when Hussein started his latest round of obstructing and evading inspectors. By his intransigence, Hussein has managed to bolster the Security Council's support for the trade sanctions on Iraq. Even Russia and France, which are eager to resume buying oil from Iraq, are exasperated with Hussein and continue to back sanctions.

Sanctions are, for most of us, much preferable to war. But as Todd Whitmore reminds us in this issue, sanctions are also a form of coercion. And since the impact of sanctions is usually felt more by ordinary citizens than by political leaders, their moral legitimacy needs to be questioned. In the case of Iraq, Whitmore helpfully proposes that the UN develop more carefully targeted and flexible sanctions that will deny Hussein military hardware but allow for rebuilding the Iraqi economy and save many innocent people from avoidable suffering.

If the sanctions can be refined in this manner, they should be. And if Hussein does cooperate with UN guidelines, the sanctions should be eased.

But we hesitate to say that all sanctions should be removed regardless of Hussein's actions. As morally problematic as sanctions are, allowing Hussein the resources to develop chemical, biological and nuclear weapons may be even more problematic.

Moral philosophers and theologians have recently learned to take account of the "heuristics of fear" in their reflections on the unknown consequences of biomedical research. Scientists proceed cautiously in the area of DNA splicing, for example, aware that an uncontrollable infectious agent may be produced. This caution is exercised even though desperately sick people might benefit significantly from the fruit of such research.

A similar caution is warranted when weapons of mass destruction are the issue. As few as ten milligrams--a mere puff--of VX nerve gas can cause death in two minutes. Iraq has confessed to manufacturing at least 260 liters of the stuff in the period before the Persian Gulf war, and over 2,000 gallons of the anthrax bacterium, which may be even more dangerous. Caution is especially justified when such weapons are in the hands of a dictator with a track record of viciousness. Saddam Hussein used chemical weapons against Iran during the 1980-88 Iran-Iraq war, and against Kurdish civilians in his own country in 1988. The threat of his use of these weapons against Israel is as real as the Iraqi scud missiles that reached Tel-Aviv during the gulf war.

The future suffering that may come from Saddam Hussein's hand cannot be quantified or measured against current suffering, but neither can it be ignored. Controlling a tyrant like Hussein involves a large cost--in time, resources and, far more important, human suffering. Failing to control him could entail a greater cost.