

Embargo is a crime

by [James M. Wall](#) in the [April 19, 2000](#) issue

If Al Gore wants to recover from the serious political and moral mistake he made when he broke with the White House in the Elián González affair, he should repudiate another Clinton administration policy that affects children—the economic strangling of Iraq, which Democratic House Minority Whip David Bonior calls “infanticide masquerading as policy.” Such a move would not only demonstrate moral courage but would also bring greater public attention to an embargo which has caused the deaths of 500,000 Iraqi children since the end of the gulf war. And, according to UNICEF, as many as 250 children continue to die each day because of the embargo. Few voices speak for these children, except for a small Iraqi immigrant community and an even smaller number of activist groups who produce newsletters and documentary films and make illegal forays into Iraq to deliver badly need supplies.

The leader of one of these groups, Charles R. Ausherman of the Institute for Development Training, came to the Religious Communications Conference in Chicago recently to show his film *Silent Weapon: The Embargo Against Iraq*. (The film and study guide are available from RR1 Box 267B, Trenton, Maine 04605.)

The film points out that Iraq once had a superior medical system, but because of the embargo doctors and hospitals can no longer obtain sufficient medicines and equipment to provide basic treatment for childhood diseases. In the film we see a child dying in a hospital, a child who could have been saved by an antibiotic available at any U.S. pharmacy.

Last September, 24 American Christian leaders sent a letter to President Clinton which said that “by almost every measure—[including] malnutrition, child mortality and overall morbidity—the situation of most Iraqi civilians has deteriorated markedly over the past eight years.” The letter continues, “Whatever the cause, whoever the adversary, we cannot tolerate the suffering and death of countless innocents, especially the very old and the very young.”

Pope John Paul had hoped to include Iraq on his recent Middle East trip, but the Vatican's request for a visit was turned down. The Iraqi government said the embargo made such a visit "impossible." (It is not clear how the UN would have viewed a Vatican plane landing in Baghdad, since all flights in or out of the country are forbidden.) When Iraq's Christian patriarch Raphael Bidawid visited the Vatican, the pope told him, "The sons and daughters of the [Catholic] Church in Iraq and all the Iraqi people who are being so severely tried by the continuing international embargo never cease to be present in my thoughts."

However well intentioned, such religious sentiments sound more like diplomatic caution than religious prophecy, and resemble the sort of muted response which the Vatican now recognizes was insufficient against Germany in World War II.

What is needed in the present situation are voices of outrage and protest, such as that of former Quaker peace worker Denis J. Halliday, who resigned from his position as the UN director of relief efforts in Iraq in September 1998. In a recent interview Halliday points to the "infrastructural damage caused by the bombing of the gulf war allies . . . [as] the single greatest cause of the current crisis of mortality and malnutrition. I'm talking about the destruction by Allied missiles and bombs of water supply systems, water distribution treatment centers, the destruction of the capacity to manufacture electric power which is so fundamental for irrigation systems and for sewage systems and for water systems."

Halliday, who served 34 years with the UN, said he decided to leave so that he would be free "to speak against the member states that are perpetuating this crime under the Security Council." Asked if he really wanted to call the UN actions a "crime," he said, "The member states of the Security Council—Britain and the United States in particular—are sustaining an economic policy on Iraq with deliberation knowing full well of the horrible impact on the innocent people and children of Iraq . . . Doing this in the full knowledge of its impact . . . is genocide."

German diplomat Hans von Sponeck, Halliday's successor, resigned from the same position in March. He has condemned the blockade as both "inhumane and ineffective," and says that the embargo has condemned young Iraqis to a bleak and dangerous future. Von Sponeck points out that the UN program to allow Iraq to sell a limited amount of oil for food and drugs falls far short of what is needed to address Iraqi suffering. "Even with the much improved revenue that is available now, \$2.9 billion for six months for a population of 23 million translates into \$252 per person

for six months. That isn't enough."

No it isn't, which is why religious communities must speak now for the children of Iraq. And one way to start is by writing to the White House along the lines of an open letter sent recently to President Clinton by a friend of mine. My friend asked the president to apply to Iraq the standards he expressed in a speech he gave recently in India: "I think that the targeting of innocent civilians is the worst thing about modern conflicts today. And given the extent to which more and more people seem to believe it is legitimate to target innocent civilians to reach their larger political goals, it is something that has to be resisted at every turn."