

A War on the Environment

by Ross Mirkarimi / Op-ed, San Francisco Chronicle

(March 19, 2003) — In the aftermath of the 1991 Persian Gulf War and ensuing UN sanctions against Iraq, there is one point on which everyone agrees: War is bad for the environment. It was a brief war, but the conflict's ecological impacts have lived far beyond the battlefield into 2003, blurring the distinction between combatants and victims who have had no say over its course.

To force Iraq out of Kuwait, no expense was spared. But the disparity in the response to the military and environmental aspects of the war could hardly have been more pronounced. Until the images of toxic clouds and oil-soaked birds were broadcast around the world, early efforts to extinguish the oil-well fires and oil spills were hampered by the Bush administration as a means of downplaying the collateral damage.

When Kuwait was liberated, the international response to rehabilitate the Persian Gulf's environment began. But the damage to Iraq was largely ignored. Thus, more Iraqi civilians — surpassing 800,000 — have died from the lingering consequences of the war than during the war itself. As the public health crisis has raged, relief organizations like UNICEF and Oxfam, in triage mode, have been forced to pirouette around the political red tape of UN sanctions.

Consequently, the environmental-health impacts that have engulfed Iraq have been treated in terms of its symptoms rather than a complex pattern. A bombed-out paint factory, the altered chemistry of a river, a defoliated tree grove and a shattered economy have all combined to foster disease, genetic mutations and slow, tortuous deaths. Once a modern-day nation, Iraq is now a country of waterborne diseases induced by improper sanitation and deficient supplies of potable water; imperiled flora and fauna due to uncontrolled pollution and habitat displacement; contaminated ecosystems peppered by allied armor-piercing bullets (depleted uranium 238) and human displacement; agricultural soil erosion caused by reduced photosynthesis and poor irrigation; and depleted livestock due to disease and the interruption of food chains.

While economic sanctions failed to weaken Saddam Hussein, Iraqi civilians, especially children, have been made to suffer. And while veterans suffered from Gulf War syndrome at home, the US government has moved woefully slow in acknowledging an illness that has claimed many of its own. Hoping to thwart the political repercussions of renewed armed conflict, the United States has minimized Gulf War syndrome as an isolated or anomalous disorder.

Coincidentally, though, evidence suggests that in the autonomous Kurdish region of northeast Iraq, civilians and soldiers who survived Hussein's chemical weapon attacks 15 years ago suffer from symptoms similar to those of Gulf War Syndrome vets. An untested link between the disparate populations was exposure to the nerve agent sarin. Since conventional science suggests that the harmful persistence of most chemical agents is short-lived, the staying power of low-dosage, intermittent exposure to sarin in humans is still not fully understood.

To force Hussein from Iraq, President George W. Bush, like his father before him, is willing to risk untold catastrophe as an acceptable price of victory. So, in light of the ecological devastation of the first Gulf War, the world community must create stronger mechanisms that protect the environment during armed conflict. These include:

- Ratification by the US Senate of the 1977 Environmental Protocol Amendments to the Geneva Conventions. This prohibits means of warfare that are intended or expected to damage the environment and its inter-connection to the health and lives of the civilian population.

- Requiring the UN Environmental Program to investigate the environmental and epidemiological impacts of the first Gulf War and the impending war in Iraq and Kurdish regions.

- Advocating for congressional commitment to support UN efforts in establishing enforcement procedures against war-induced environmental devastation. Nonviolent sanctions and trade embargoes against offenders would be a first step.

But although very necessary, a strengthened international code is of limited value. The conduct of war and the protection of the natural environment are fundamentally incompatible objectives. The most important step we can all take is to work for peaceful means in resolving conflicts abroad. Environmental organizations from around the globe are banding together in opposition to this war. To learn more, visit the Website at <http://www.envirosagainstar.org>.

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