

Iraq's children pay the price of war

by Leila Billing

Iraq's ruinous wars, crippling sanctions and ongoing violence have had a devastating effect on children. Shootings and bombings have killed, injured and orphaned thousands but the biggest killer is illness transmitted through unclean water and exacerbated by under-nutrition.

In a statement made on the eve of the 2003 invasion of Iraq, Olara A Otunnu, the then Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict, stressed that "the children of Iraq are innocent, and all parties must make their protection an absolute priority ... we must now begin to put in place plans to ensure that the well-being, rehabilitation

and development of the children of Iraq will constitute a central aspect of any programmes for post-conflict recovery and reconstruction."

This has not happened. One in eight Iraqi children dies before their fifth birthday. Nine per cent are acutely malnourished – double the number prior to 2003. Hundreds of schools have been attacked and teachers

killed. Unexploded ordnance and mines litter the country. Children are injured on dumps looking for metal to sell to help support their families. Thousands of homeless children survive by begging, stealing or scavenging in garbage for food. There has been a marked increase in rates of childhood leukaemia as a result of exposure to radiation from cluster bombs, the high use of chemicals in agriculture and water contamination.

The NGO War Child recently interviewed some 400 children in southern Iraq. Research also involved talking to the children's families, to local community members and to those working with vulnerable and

marginalised children. Role-playing, social-drama activities and drawing encouraged children to map out their daily lives. Asked to rank their problems, they cited poverty, family breakdown, terrorism and lack of security as their primary concerns.

Our results showed how conflict is leading to the increased criminalisation and stigmatisation of children. We are witnessing high levels of family breakdown and an increase of female-headed households. Children are being forced to assume income-generating roles because their families are suffering from acute poverty. That means children leaving school, going out on to the streets in search of work and becoming exposed to illegal livelihood activities. Boys and girls are engaging in sex work, selling weapons, alcohol, drugs and pornography. Out of economic necessity children as young as eight are becoming involved in such enterprises. Branded as 'bad children' they are stigmatised and subject to

social exclusion. Many are dependent on marihuana or inhale solvents.

Many of the families we spoke to during the course of this research wished that they had another option and did not have to put their children in danger. But some children we spoke to said their families have been the primary perpetrators of abuse against them. Some young boys and girls said that parents or members of their extended families had forced them to engage in sex work. The family, as well as being a force that protects, can also be a force that causes extreme forms of abuse.

Children are surrounded by violence and insecurity on a daily basis which has an adverse effect on their behaviour and psychological development. It is quite common for Iraqi kids to be playing with guns and to demonstrate the violent behaviour they see about them on a daily basis. Quite a few of the children that we spoke to, particularly the boys forced to engage in sex work, carry knives to protect themselves. Some of them

display aggressive behaviour as a kind of protection mechanism. They are trying to say: "Look, don't mess with me; I'm capable of defending myself." But, deep down, I think we are dealing with quite scared children.

War Child has existed since the war in former Yugoslavia. Our experience shows us the way forward is to first involve communities in trying to break down the stigma that these children have. If the community is on board, you can really help to promote a protective environment for the children themselves. The key to community involvement is reaching those community leaders, mullahs and other authority figures and using them as a way of mobilising the rest of the population.

Leila Billing (leila@warchild.org.uk) is Programmes Coordinator for War Child UK (www.warchild.org.uk)

Testimonies from marginalised Iraqi children are at <http://streetkidnews.blogspot.com/category/1/europe-streetkid-news/iraq-streetkid-news>

Iraqi girl displays scar from a wound received during a mortar attack.

