

April 2005: Five Days in Iraq

by
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Every time I travel to Iraq I do it with the expectation that I will find at least a hint of an improvement in the living conditions of the people; but I meet with disappointment every time: So again this time. On April 18, 2005 Bashar (our technician) and I fly to Kuwait to travel on to Basra from there. There still is no direct cross-border traffic between Kuwait and Iraq and we have to be taken to the border, cross on foot and then have to be picked up on the other side. Two hours before we pass through a bomb exploded on the road between Basra and the border. On the day before our arrival three bombs exploded in front of the university, when a bus with policemen was attacked. And on the second day of our visit a bomb blows up in front of the central police station, injuring seven policemen. The central police station is located on one of Basra's main streets, through which we too must pass every day and where there are always traffic jams due to street closings. One does get a little queasy, standing squeezed in between all the stopped cars. And later we are going to hear about the constant fears the Iraqi policemen must live with. Every day, when they leave the house to go to work, they say good-bye to their families, as if they were never going to come home again. The fear of death is a constant companion in their work. It is easy and cheap to get weapons in Iraq: One can get a hand grenade for 500 Dinars, which is 30 cents.

Sugar water for babies instead of milk

I spend an afternoon in the office of the pediatrician Dr. Jenan. For the two tiny rooms, one the treatment room, the other the waiting room, the doctor has three separate electrical conduits to make sure that she can always do her work, since the rooms have no windows. One of the conduits is from the electrical network, the other two from separate electrical generators. We were shocked by what we saw here that afternoon. The number of malnourished children keeps rising and gives cause for concern. The reason? The women, who bring their sick children, tell us: Before they received milk powder with their monthly food rations if they had a young child. They no longer receive milk powder (no one knows why) and a can of milk powder (500 g) costs up to eight Dollars in the store, an amount which for the many unemployed in Iraq is an astronomical one. Fresh milk is virtually unavailable. Before the war milk powder cost a few cents. So the women feed their babies and infants sugar water. This not only reduces the resistance to infectious diseases, but also can result in permanent brain damage. More and more children are stricken with tuberculosis, the number of children with the tropical disease Kala Azar is on the increase. The number of premature births, of miscarriages is rising, the birth weight of many newborns is insufficient. The majority of Dr. Jenan's patients are younger than three or four years old, severely underweight and most of them suffer from severe diarrhea. One child is born without eyes; he is 18 months old and has the physique of a six-month-old infant.

The ear splitting noise of the electric generators has become a part of Basra for me. This time it hardly ever stops. If there is municipal electric service it is interrupted again and again. It is no more than two or three hours a day, for sure. Wealthy

people have generators, which cost a few thousand Dollars. The majority of people in Basra is poor and certainly cannot afford a generator. It was April and the temperature was already 105 F, soon it will be over 120 F. The evening meal is taken most of the time by candlelight, not because it is more romantic, but because there is no electricity and if it starts up it is only for a few minutes. A telephone call to Baghdad is impossible, because an attack on a telephone exchange in Kut, has disabled all connections with the Southern part of the country. There is still garbage in the streets and sewage still floods the roads. Nothing works and the motivation to work is generally missing.

The quality of the tap water in Basra is so poor that we will need a sedimentation basin for the drinking water treatment plant, which we installed in the children's hospital. Otherwise the mud will soon ruin the membranes. 40% of Basra's population is connected to the water mains network. The others drink river water, or buy drinking water from tank cars, 5 gallons for 400 Dinars. That is not so little for unemployed Iraqis. I hear from physicians that they have found cholera and dysentery pathogens in this water, because unscrupulous profiteers have mixed the purified water with river water to increase their profit. In Basra's General Hospital there is no water at all in the obstetric department and the patients are asked to bring their own water for drinking and washing up. Many people have worms due to the poor water quality and the lack of sewage disposal is the cause of many infectious diseases.

"We have put so much hope in the elections" say many people "but now three months have passed already and we still don't have a government. How can anything function if the country doesn't have a government? We're doing worse than during the sanctions!" And a woman doctor adds: "The new Iraq consists of cell phones, satellite dishes and bananas; that we didn't have before. Well, and now one can complain about the government, but that doesn't get us anywhere either. Before we just thought that to ourselves and didn't talk about it. But otherwise everything is just as before, or still worse!" The people don't think much of the many new parties and they don't really expect much from the new transitional government. One hardly sees the British in Basra, if one does, they are driving through the streets with their submachine guns leveled, and once we saw British soldiers in front of the hospital with weapons at the ready. This behavior, which the Iraqis consider threatening and provocative, I had previously observed only from the Americans in Baghdad.

Alladin's Magic Lamp: Hope amidst the Chaos

Amidst all the chaos it is nice to hear that the children's cancer ward, which is being supported by us, is the best in all of Iraq. Patients come from far away for treatment, because word has gotten around in the entire country that medications are available here. The Director tells us that cancer-stricken children come here even from Baghdad for treatment. Zaid is here too, the one and a half year old boy who had been sick with leukemia last year and who had enchanted us with his laughter. Zaid is still laughing, even after several cycles of chemotherapy. As before, the children's cancer ward is totally dependent on our support. If we had not helped them during the past years, all the children, without exception, would have died. And it is not only a few who have been treated here: last year there were 836 children. A short while

ago the entire sewer system of the hospital was clogged and as a result all wet rooms of the children's cancer ward were flooded with sewage; even a section of the department itself was flooded. The damage in the wet rooms is enormous and the present hygienic situation imperils the children, who, as a result of the chemotherapy, are very susceptible to infections. Quick action would be necessary here: Repairing the wet rooms and resolving the sewer problem. I immediately arranged for a cost estimate, which came to 20,000 Euros. Not a small sum, but if these defects are not remedied the success of our project is in jeopardy.

The mothers of Basra refuse to have their children admitted to the neonatal section of the hospital, because the catastrophically poor conditions in this department are well known in all of Basra and only very few children who are admitted there survive. We hope that this will change in a few months, because the main reason for our visit is to initiate the remodeling of this department, which is being funded by Caritas Austria. It is not easy to find a reliable company for such an undertaking in today's Iraq. After bargaining about the cost for days we are successful: The contract is signed and as soon as the director of the hospital has moved the department work can get started. In about two months it is supposed to be completed – inshallah, as one here says to everything that lies in the future, i.e. if it is God's will.

During those days we were virtually besieged by parents of sick children and also by sick adults. We had tried very hard to keep our presence as secret as possible, but the news that we were here had spread like a wildfire in all of Basra. Everyone wanted our advice, wanted to be treated abroad. I cannot give much hope to these people, because it is not easy to find a place for treatment in Austria. Many of the people are glad just to have their worries listened to and I can send a few children to Dr. Jenan for treatment. I take the diagnoses of a few with me to Austria, hoping to be able to arrange for treatment there. At this time there is no other humanitarian organization in Basra that arranges for treatment abroad. The few relief organizations that are still represented here are staffed with local personnel and are very limited in their functioning, because no international relief organization will send a representative to Iraq: The risk is simply too high.

They will leave – but we are staying

At the entrance to Basra there is an inordinately large sign, which says: "They will leave – but we're staying" – meaning the terrorists, who commit attacks every day all over the country. The people, however, joke about who might have ordered this sign. That the occupiers will stay in the country about that the people have no doubt, while most Iraqis rack their brains how to leave the country to escape this chaos. The Iraqis see themselves as the ones who will leave.

Once, when we sit at supper at the house of the Archbishop, there is a scream from the cook. Her husband has brought the news that a relative, who had been abducted, has been found dead. Even though ransom had been paid for him he had been formally executed. Death is ever-present in Iraq and for over two years everyone leaving the house in the morning wonders whether he will see his family again in the evening. Here in Austria we don't hear of all the attacks and murders by a long shot. The death, or the disabling of a man plunges an entire family into the abyss, for he is often the sole support of an extended family and not infrequently up to twenty people are dependent on his income. When Iraqis get together they have always liked to tell

Aladdin's Magic Lamp – Help for Cancer-Stricken Children in Basra

each other jokes that refer to the current situation. Even if it was strictly forbidden at the time, even posing mortal danger, Saddam Hussein naturally was often the butt of those jokes. Now it is the Americans, the British – even death - that has become the subject of these jokes. It is a way of coping with the wretched everyday and the fear that often remains unexpressed.

In the name of the sick children of Basra we would like to express our heartfelt thanks to DHL Austria; 500 lbs of reagents for the equipment for blood analysis of the hospital were shipped to Basra from Vienna free of charge. We also want to thank this time again Dr. Faisal in Kuwait who again granted us his hospitality and support. He has become not only our friend, but also the friend of the sick children of Basra. IPPNW Germany we offer thanks for their continuing support (funding of the reagents). We URGENTLY ask for continued support; primarily we are looking for a sponsor to fund the urgently needed work at the children's cancer ward. For the time being our assistance MUST be continued; the sick children of Basra need US!