

ALADDIN'S MAGIC LAMP

A new Iraq – a new life?

Trip to Iraq: December 6 – 13, 2004

We were last in Iraq in June 2004 and had planned the next trip for October the latest. But it was December before we were finally ready. The preparations for this trip sometimes used up all our patience and all the prior indications did not promise much success. The security situation in Iraq had again deteriorated since our last relief transport and violent incidents against foreigners and against Iraqis working for foreigners were increasing daily in frequency and brutality. Members of relief organization too had become increasingly targets of abductions and executions. The news of the probable murder of Margaret Hassan, the director of the relief organization “Care”, signaled an absolute low point for humanitarian activity in Iraq. This news shocked everyone who had been and was still engaged in relief work in Iraq and understandably we too had doubts whether a trip would still be possible this year. On the other hand, there was the fact that the supply of medications at the children’s hospital in Basra was running out and our help was urgently needed.

In November 2004 the coalition forces started a big military offensive in Falluja, which resulted in the closure of the access road. Thus the road, through which our relief supplies had always been routed, i.e. via Amman and then by truck to Basra, was blocked. The road remained closed, even after the offensive was declared completed and no Jordanian forwarding company would accept a shipment to Iraq.

No money for Iraq

How many people have actually died in this war? We will never know the exact numbers, but at the beginning of November the reputable journal “Lancet” published an article, which talks about 100,000 dead Iraqis as a result of the war in the spring of 2003. Not included in this figure are those who die as a result of the miserable conditions in the hospitals, due to polluted drinking water, etc. Daily we hear reports of attacks in which predominantly Iraqis lose their lives. We are so used to these reports that we hardly take notice of them and most of the time they are no longer even published. The topic “Iraq” is hardly of interest to the media anymore and as a result the lack of financial resources for a relief transport became one of the reasons for the delay of our trip. Who donates still money for Iraqi children? Our relief project however, - and with it the lives of the critically ill children of Basra – depends exclusively on donations. The few donations, which were received in the last months, were simply not enough for a relief shipment. Finally, there were three organizations, which made a relief shipment still possible: Caritas Austria, Difam in Tübingen and IPPNW Germany.

Our drinking water treatment plant, which we had sent on a long trip in September - Hallein – Hamburg – Abu Dabi – Kuwait – Basra – was in storage in Kuwait for the time being and was waiting to be shipped on to Basra. The Austrian technicians, who were to have installed the plant in Basra, had cancelled their participation for understandable reasons. One had to look for Iraqi technicians now, who could undertake the installation and prices had to be negotiated. Never before had a relief transport required so much organizational work.

Vienna – Kuwait – Basra

It was finally decided: we, i.e. Ing. Bashar Hindo and I, as well as our relief supplies (8.3 tons of medications and medical supplies), will travel to Basra via Kuwait, in defiance of all warnings. We had no experience with this route. Then, when everything was cleared up, the shipment was at the airport in Vienna and even our flights were booked, the weekly airfreight flight from Amman to Kuwait was cancelled. Again there was a delay, again we had to re-book. But then, on November 30th, the time had finally arrived: Our relief supplies were on their way from Vienna via Maastricht and Amman to Kuwait. From there they were to be shipped to Basra.

On December 8 the two of us flew from Vienna to Amsterdam and from there to Kuwait City. While onboard we heard the news that the U.S. had again attacked Falluja from the air and that the staff of the Red Crescent had again to leave the ruined city, because “the situation in the city did not offer sufficient protection”. In the plane the tension that had plagued me during the last few weeks finally left me. It is not easy to make a decision against the, almost universal, advice from everyone in Austria and in Iraq. Great uncertainty lay ahead of us; after all, we had never before traveled to Iraq via Kuwait. Bashar is an Iraqi citizen; will he have problems in Kuwait? We had only received entrance visa to Kuwait, but none for a re-entry after our stay in Iraq. What to do if our re-entry were to be denied? A few days before our departure we had been given a telephone contact, Dr. Faisal Alkazemi, an entrepreneur in Kuwait, who had promised me that he would take care of everything. The flight from Vienna to Kuwait via Amsterdam takes eight hours and by the time we landed in Kuwait City it was already midnight. In spite of that Dr. Faisal and General Mohammed were waiting at the airport to welcome us, to guide us safely through the Kuwaiti customs and then still to place us in a very good hotel. The reply to our hesitant protestations about the expensive hotel was: “You are our guests”. The plane carrying our relief supplies arrived in Kuwait on the same evening.

The next day was busy with taking care of the bureaucratic obstacles. While Dr. Faisal was looking after our re-entry permits and the relief supplies General Mohammed took care of my exit permit from Kuwait to Iraq. (Bashar, as Iraqi citizen did not need it.) By the late afternoon it was all settled and next morning we left Kuwait City on a four-lane highway and were taken to the border between Kuwait and Iraq. A shuttle bus brought us through the no-man’s-land, because cars with Kuwaiti plates are not allowed in Iraq. Then, a long wait in the icy desert wind and we continue on foot with our luggage. On the Iraqi side three men await us, who are to take us to Basra. Now, however, I am traveling with the “hijab”, the headscarf. On the short stretch between Safwan, on the Iraqi border, to Basra (about 1 hour by car), there are innumerable checkpoints. Frequently they are set up within sight of each other. Masked, armed men manned a few of the checkpoints. At first, when we approached them I thought that they had to be terrorists, but then we learned that they were Iraqi National Guards. The “Iraqi National Guards” are well liked by the people, because they take strict measures and at least attempt to preserve order. On the entire stretch of road, however, we did not see British troops.

Then, finally in Basra: The contrast could not be greater. Still the images of the rich, luxurious Kuwait in our memories, here the slums of Basra confront us. There everything is clean and well kept, here everything is neglected. It rained last night and since the sewer system doesn’t work, there is water standing everywhere in the streets. Garbage is floating in the huge puddles. Buildings in disrepair, upholstered furniture in the street, covered with plastic. The contrast makes it clearer what has gone wrong in this country during the last few

decades. “New Iraq, new life, new Basra” one can read on a huge billboard at the periphery of town. So far only empty words. To take pictures in the street has now become just as impossible as before, if for different reasons. We drive through the streets of Basra. Again and again I see outsized billboards resplendent with slogans about the reconstruction of the “new Iraq”. One shows a man, a Kalashnikov in one hand, a shovel in the other. As soon as the car stops at an intersection a few begging women stand in front of it. The number of malnourished children has almost doubled during the last two years, according to UNICEF. Hundreds of thousands of children under the age of five are malnourished, said Carol Bellamy, the spokesperson of the UN Children’s Aid Fund on December 5th; many suffer from chronic diarrhea. No wonder, two days later I learn that the drainpipe of one of the big hospitals drains untreated into the river; unfortunately not an exception in Iraq.

I have never experienced Basra as being so cold. On this day I am bitterly cold. It is 40F, it is pouring rain and heat does not exist here. As always we are staying at the house of the Archbishop and I am very grateful when they put radiators into our cold rooms. My joy, however, is short-lived: There is hardly any power in Basra. The generators rattle everywhere – as long as there is fuel. Often enough it is only available on the black market at greatly inflated prices. The generator at the Bishop’s house has to be manually re-started every time the power fails; therefore there is no power at the house at night and no heat. Neither is there hot water in the morning. Nobody really knows why the power supply is still not working, but innumerable rumors circulate. Also, there has not been any running water and the telephone too has not worked for days. For the entire time we have been unable to phone the adjoining town Nasiriya. I write in my diary at night by candlelight, wrapped in my sleeping bag.

Plastic flowers instead of medications

Nothing has changed in the Ibn Ghazwan Mother-Child Hospital either, except that it is increasingly falling into disrepair. A strange sight hits me right at the entrance: There are a few plastic plants in the hall, several have also been distributed in the various departments. Later we learn from the Director that these have been sent by the Ministry of Health “for the beautification” of the hospital. Medications, on the other hand, are not available from the Ministry and the supply of pharmaceuticals is as bad as ever. The whole region of Basra for instance has received as many infusions as a single hospital in Baghdad. Wasn’t it that way already before the war?

“Our” children’s cancer ward is in very good shape and the manager, Dr. Jenan, proudly shows us the statistics of the decrease in deaths in this department, since we have been supplying them regularly with the necessary medications. Mortality has declined from 100% to 30%. There are many, many children who have been cured because of our help. New cases of pediatric cancer and leukemia continue to increase, however. The fact that the department has not received a single medication from the Ministry of Health defies credulity. As before, the life of the little patients here depends exclusively on our help. That is not a small responsibility resting on our shoulders. The department is overcrowded and they eagerly look forward to the arrival of our pharmaceutical shipment. In one of the rooms a girl struggles for breath, despite an oxygen mask. She is suffering from severe pneumonia and Dr. Jenan says that she urgently needs our medications – which will arrive the day after.

From the bed across I hear a cheerful child’s voice. Zaid, a year and a half old, was beaming all over his face. He was fascinated by the flash on my camera and he bewitched us with his little-boy’s charm. A few days ago his mother was hit by the terrible blow of his diagnosis:

Her only child is suffering from leukemia. She speaks English and besieges me with questions, all of which have only one theme: “Will my child be cured?” Dr. Jenan answers for me: “Yes, with God’s help and with the help of the medications from Austria and Germany Zaid will survive!” Again, I become aware of the responsibility that rests on us. We must continue what we have achieved so far, but we are hardly getting any donations. Two years ago, when the war was already on the horizon, we thought – probably contrary to better judgment – that the situation would sufficiently stabilize in two years that Iraq would be able to take care of its sick children. Indeed, the resources are in existence. When I last expressed these thoughts in Basra, a physician said that the Iraqi people have never in their history been able to make use of their natural riches and that would not change in the future either. The oil is the curse of this land! Is this man going to be right, or is this fear only an expression of the general hopelessness?

People assure us that the security situation is clearly better in Basra than in Baghdad. We learn, nevertheless, that on the day after our arrival a physician was gunned down in the street and the next day a bomb explodes not far from the hospital, wounding several policemen. There is no curfew, but one observes the rule not to spend time on the street after 8 p.m. We must violate this rule several times, because we would otherwise simply be unable to accomplish our tasks. Driving home in the rain afterwards is like flying blind. The sand has formed thick layers on the windshield, which resist even the heavy rain. Often I hear shots in the street during the night and the roar of the British military helicopters. During the day one hardly ever sees the British occupiers, only once do we see two military vehicles in the street during those days. Sirens of police cars wail every few minutes. The fact that the 340-bed hospital has to be protected by 30 policemen sheds light the true situation in Basra. But even that could not prevent the discovery of a bomb not far from the entrance to the cancer ward, which, however, could be disarmed in time. It is also the duty of the policemen to protect the hospital from theft and they search the bags of everyone entering and leaving the hospital. They tell us that it is very difficult to get a handle on the thievery. We could judge how unsafe the situation really is by the fact that we were always accompanied by at least one of our friends and that they forbade to use a taxi, out of fear for our safety. We were always driven from door to door and I was only allowed to leave the car after the door of the house had been unlocked. This even though I was dressed like an Iraqi woman all the time and was therefore not conspicuous in public. That my masquerade was not total, however, I had to experience at the hospital: When I walked through the corridors on the first day, Bashar heard someone say behind me: “That is Dr. Eva, isn’t it?” A staff member of the hospital laboratory in fact asked me whether I had converted to Islam? After our truck had arrived half of Basra knew that we were there anyway.

What do people expect of the elections in January? Nothing, say most people and they won’t go anyway, because they are afraid. (To be sure a rumor has already surfaced that the food ration cards for 2005 would only be given to those who voted.) Others said it would make things worse, because while now the city administration of Basra was in the hands of one party that would change and the battles would start anew. Couldn’t things get better in Iraq? Well yes, one can hope, but people don’t really believe it; because now things go steadily and daily further downhill. The resignation increasingly paralyses the people, they have given up, life outside their home hardly interests them at all and wrestling with everyday problems consumes all their energy. Nothing works anymore and the indifference and disinterest more and more feeds this vicious circle. Those who are committed to their profession are getting increasingly depressed. The more audacious among the men join the police, but also the idealists. They risk their lives every minute, for \$400 monthly pay. It is said that over 1000 Iraqi policemen were murdered during the last six months.

Peace on earth?

In the house of the Archbishop of Basra, Gabriel Kassab, nothing indicates that Christmas is approaching. “For us there won’t be Christmas this year”, he says bitterly, “no midnight mass, no celebration”. That has never happened in Iraq, he recalls. Christians live in great fear, men with submachine guns stand in front of the church during mass. Again only two days ago a church has been destroyed in Mosul, as well as an over 1000-year-old library, with irreplaceable manuscripts. Women who walk in the street in Mosul without headscarves have acid thrown in their faces and several Christians have been murdered. Even though the situation here in Basra is – still – better, bribes and threats of murder are everyday occurrences here as well. Corruption, thefts, abductions belong to the bitter daily routine. Unemployment continues to increase and those who have found employment with British or American firms have again given up their jobs, after they received death threats and after a few were actually murdered. “Peace on earth” is the Christmas message, but for the people in Iraq there has been no peace in decades. Will it ever be possible to live in peace in this land?

In any case, the Archbishop has reopened the nursery school after one and a half years, if only with 40 children, because there is no transportation for more and one is afraid of abductions. The charity pharmacy, where anyone with a doctor’s prescription will receive his medication – depending whether it is available, or not – is still in operation and is being used by many.

The relief supplies arrive in Basra

The Archbishop has lent us his cell phone and this way we were able to stay in touch with Dr. Faisal in Kuwait. Two days after our arrival came the magic call: Our truck will arrive in Basra in the afternoon. The arrival of the truck in front of the hospital then became the sensation of the day in the neighborhood around the hospital. A big crowd of the curious gathered. Actually, we too were very impressed, because the truck was accompanied by a 13-head “security team”. Three cars with a total of 13 armed men, some of them masked, had escorted the, to the brim loaded, truck and had brought it safely to Basra. A masked man with a submachine gun sat on top of one of the cars, a Chevrolet pick-up. Ten policemen from the hospital then joined the 13 security men and guarded by them the truck was unloaded. In any case, the unloading took several hours since everything was done manually and from time to time the policemen helped too. The important thing was to unload the 1200 lbs blood separation centrifuge from the truck without the help of mechanical devices. A few hospital employees were happy that they could earn additional money. It had gotten dark long ago when the truck was finally empty and everything had been stored in the hospital. 30 pallets, loaded with medications, medical supplies such as syringes, cannulae, hypodermic needles, catheters, etc. and several medical devices, altogether 8.3 tons, had safely survived the long trip from Vienna to Basra. Every time when I again see the pallets, which I had marked in Vienna before, in Basra, I am incredulous that everything has indeed arrived undamaged and complete. Dr. Faisal told us later that the security team costs \$10,000 per day. For us, however, it was free of charge, since Dr. Faisal paid for it. He said that he thought it necessary to send this team along, since again and again trucks together with their drivers disappear from the road. Actually these giant thefts have reached such dimensions that they can no longer be assessed, or controlled. The whole country has become a self-service store.

The next day we sort the cartons in the warehouse, identify their contents and make lists. Time flies. The blood count apparatus, which we had brought in June, had been put out of commission through an operator’s error. The desperate attempts of the staff to repair the

device had made things even worse. Bashar had had several days' training in Vienna and so we started the repair one day after our arrival already. Bashar was able to make the device fully functional again and the staff of the laboratory was overjoyed. There was little time left to retrain them again. We were stressed every minute of our days in Basra. For safety reasons we had chosen to make our stay as short as possible, but we were presented with innumerable problems and it would have required a lot more time to solve them all. A few children were presented to us, who cannot be treated in Iraq. Fadi, a 13-year-old boy, with a severe bone growth disorder causing extreme knock-knees, which makes it very difficult for him to walk; I had examined him in June by candle light (once again there was no power and the family didn't have a generator) and had viewed his X-rays with a flashlight. Fadi came to Vienna on January 9, 2005 and has already been operated on in the meantime. Four more children were presented to me, with the request to have them treated in Austria. We are still lacking places where they could be treated. I saw little Sarah with the brittle bone disease again, who had been in Austria for eight months and her condition is most encouraging. She can now finally attend school, which was denied to her before, because of her illness. She proudly showed me the picture of her sitting in midst of the children in her class. I also saw Zainab again, who was in Innsbruck for treatment a year ago. Unfortunately she was not doing as well as last time. The reason is probably that her father was unable to arrange for the checkups on a regular schedule. The family lives some distance from Basra and there is no functioning public transportation. What does function here anyway? Often during those days we feel our own helplessness in this chaos and our bitterness over the difficulty to just live a normal everyday life. One really cannot imagine this, unless one has experienced it for oneself. I have stopped condemning people when they don't take care of anything, because I understand their resignation. One cannot constantly, during one's entire life, every minute of the day struggle against adversity. No employment, no power, no water, no telephone and on top of it the constant threat – after a while one simply gives up. "It is difficult to live without hope", says a young man. "If you have a goal, if you know for instance that the house that you are building will only be finished in five years, you can live with that, even if it takes all that long. But in this land there are no goals for us, no hope."

Water means life – the water treatment plant for the children's hospital

Clean drinking water is an absolute necessity for a hospital, but it has unfortunately not been available in Basra for years. As a result hundreds of infants get sick of diarrhea every year and many of the children die as result. Thus the idea has occurred to us to put a drinking water treatment plant at the disposal of the Ibn Ghwan. Caritas Bozen and Caritas Austria were generous in shouldering the major part of financing it. The order for manufacturing was placed at the end of 2003, by March 2004 the work was completed. At the same time preparatory work (foundation, water tanks, rerouting of pipes) was done in Basra. The completion of this work was delayed due to the difficult situation in Iraq, but by the beginning of April all this preliminary work was completed. At that time, however, the political situation in Iraq deteriorated to such an extent, that one could not even think of shipping the equipment, which is permanently mounted in a trailer. The container stood therefore for months in a warehouse in Wals/Salzburg, until it could be sent in the beginning of September by boat on the long journey to Basra. The water treatment plant has arrived in Basra at the end of November and since then Iraqi technicians are working to put it in operation. The work was now nearly finished; the plant was conducting a trial run. 30,000 gallons of clean drinking water daily will be available to the hospital in only a few days. Our equipment can thus provide the entire drinking water needs of the hospital, plus the entire water supply for the surgery departments and will play an important role in the prevention of illnesses. The Mother-Child Hospital has now one of the most up-to-date drinking water

treatment plants (Containerized reverse osmosis system) on the market today. The era, when children fall again ill in the hospital, because of polluted drinking water, should now be forever at an end.

Our last day in Basra has arrived. We realize every morning: We have survived another night. During the day we never have time to think of the danger, because we are simply too busy. In a few days it is going to be Christmas; are there truly shopping sprees anywhere in this world? To me it seemed as if a movie film had broken and then been re-glued at the wrong place. Pre-Christmas bustle in Vienna, traffic jams in the streets, crowded stores, people busy preparing for the Christmas holidays. Change of scenery to Basra, Southern Iraq: Hopelessness, resignation, chaos and violence. This time our stay was extremely short and I wish that we could stay longer. In the face of all the difficulties and adverse circumstances we have to be thankful that our enterprise has again been so successful. The success of our efforts, however, should not obscure the actual situation in Iraq, which is worse than ever. Improved has the situation only for the war profiteers.

A last visit in the children's cancer ward; we say a warm goodbye to everyone. The cleaning women proudly show us how they use their new cleaning carts. We check the water treatment plant, visit the technical office; children are presented to us for treatment, we give advice, take leave from the Archbishop. In the meantime Dr. Faisal calls and tells us that the Kuwaiti border is closed. Now what? Tonight is our flight to Amsterdam. Thank God, we are too busy to worry! A short while later comes an "all clear": The border is open again. Well, we sit in Adnan's car already, he is Mustafa's uncle. (Ten-year-old Mustafa is in treatment in Vienna at this time and will return home on December 15.) We leave Basra much too late; at 4 p.m. – still before it gets dark – the Kuwaiti border will be closed. We reach the border crossing five minutes before. Once again it went well! Dr. Faisal's driver welcomes us on the other side and an hour and a half later we are in Kuwait City. At 1:30 a.m. we take off from the airport in Kuwait and we are back in Vienna before noon. Long were the preparations for the trip, many difficulties had to be overcome. The journey itself was so short and problem-free, that we ourselves could hardly believe it.

Zaid's laughter

I want to express warm thanks to everyone who has contributed to the success of this relief transport. This relief shipment was made possible by contributions from Austria, Southern Tyrol and Germany, as well as through the cooperation with Caritas Austria – and through the totally unexpected – help of people in Kuwait, first and foremost DHL Kuwait and the Faisal Alkazemi Group of Companies. That Kuwaitis should support the cause of Iraqi children cannot be taken for granted if one knows the conflict-laden history of these two countries. This speaks of human greatness and therefore deserves our deepest gratitude and highest respect. Our project "Aladdin's Magic Lamp" has the goal, in addition to giving direct help to sick children, the reconciliation of cultures and religions and the dismantling of concepts of enmity. Having experienced this so concretely has been our greatest Christmas present.

Will we be able to maintain little Zaid's laughter? Will he later, when he has forgotten all the pain and suffering of the chemotherapy, which is still awaiting him, be able to live a normal life? That too is in our hands. Then he will be one of those Iraqi children to whom the magnificent cooperation of people in Austria, Germany, in South Tyrol and in Kuwait has given a new life. If – well, if we can continue our work, because Zaid's treatment will take

another two years. And every month five to eight more children fall ill with cancer and leukemia. They all need us.

A Muslim said to me in Basra the other day: “God gives the gift to help others to those who are especially close to Him.” I believe that we all have this gift; we perhaps only need to rediscover it in ourselves. Our help in Basra is more urgent than ever and it needs to continue. The lives of these children depend exclusively and totally on our support! The “New Iraq” will be a wishful dream for a long time and until conditions of living improve in this land, its people will need our help. The sick children of Basra “ can have a new life” – with your help!

Dr. Eva-Maria Hobiger

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