

Reflection: Basrah, Iraq, 30 October 2002

By Jane MacKay
Wright

“How can the Iraqi people treat us with such hospitality, under these circumstances,” I asked. We were seventeen peace activists from the United States and Canada on a pilgrimage to extend our friendship to the people of Iraq, to witness to our beliefs, and to try to better understand. The Most Reverend Gabriel T. Kassab, Archbishop of Basrah and South Iraq, smiled at the group seated around the high-ceilinged white room in his residence. The Iraqi people have had thousands of years of civilization, the Archbishop explained, “Hospitality, generosity to others, is our custom.”

In the West, Iraq is portrayed as barbarous, untrustworthy, and ready to unleash heinous weapons of mass destruction. The United States and the United Kingdom have waged a campaign of fear against Iraq. The people of Iraq have been living with threats of war for over four months. And they have also been living with U.S. and U.K. bombing raids. Bombers fly over Basrah every second day, Archbishop Kassab

reported. The sirens go off when the planes come, and the children cry. Their mothers are up at night with them calming nightmares. Ten days ago Basrah airport was bombed four times, he told us shaking his head in disbelief, “not once but four times.” Three years ago, a bomb which landed near one of the churches under Archbishop Kassab’s care, killed six people and injured fifty others. Bombers also destroyed a downtown neighbourhood, and killed a group of children playing in the street.

We had travelled south to Basrah while others in our group journeyed to the northern city of Mosul. These cities lie within the area that the U.S. and the U.K. have declared a “no-fly” zone. It covers almost half of the country. In Mosul, as nuns prayed in an old Christian church, our group of visitors heard a squadron of American and British bombers swoop low over the city. We, who visited Basrah, had an opportunity to visit the precious archeological site of Ur. We marvelled at the ziggurat built 4250 years ago as a temple to the moon. A proud guide showed us examples of Sumerian script, civilization’s first written language, in its baked steps. He also pointed out holes in the ancient bricks caused by U.S.-led strafing.

THE GULF WAR HAS NOT ENDED FOR IRAQI PEOPLE.

Dr. Jawad Al Ali, of the Saddam Teaching Hospital in Basrah, told us about January 26, 1999, the day that the U.S.-led coalition dropped bombs onto the hospital garden. The oncology ward’s roof collapsed and doctors on duty scrambled to free themselves from the wreckage.

Their patients were sent home. Five women doctors working in the hospital at that time have succumbed to cancer. In fact, mortality statistics for the region show a 14% increase in the last three to four years. Some patients have more than one cancer, and often several members of one family have cancer. Also, in the last ten years, the number of malformed babies being born has increased from 1.8 to 3.8 per thousand. Iraqis know they are contaminated, “from the war,” said Dr. Jawad. We learned also of the destruction of water and sewage treatment facilities that continue to cause illness and death, especially among children.

Waves of guilt and shame came over us as we sipped tea with the Archbishop. “How are Iraqis preparing for the possibility of a U.S. war?” someone timidly asked. Archbishop Kassab was forthright. People do not know what to do. Of course they are worried, but how can one prepare for such a thing? You live as you must. How can such a question be answered? Dr. Jawad had said the same. “And do you know what will be destroyed should war come to this country?” the Archbishop added. This time it was our turn to not know how to respond. What more would war do to this country, we wondered. Archbishop Kassab looked at us, waited for an answer, and then spoke. “It is God, the very image of God, which will be killed should war come,” he continued.

The room was silent. □

*Jane MacKay
Wright is a
member of
Toronto
Monthly
Meeting.*

