

Reported doubling in child mortality in Iraq following UN sanctions untrue

“Remarkable fiction” cooked up in 1999 to get sanctions lifted

The reported almost doubling in child mortality in Iraq following the imposition of economic sanctions in 1990 was a “remarkable fiction” cooked up by Saddam Hussein’s government to stir up international condemnation and get the sanctions lifted, say experts in the online journal **BMJ Global Health**.

Although child mortality rates in Iraq remain around twice as high as those of neighbouring countries to this day, there is no evidence that these rates were unusually high between 1991 and 2003—the year that Britain and the US spearheaded military action against Iraq.

The United Nations Security Council imposed the sanctions in 1990 following Iraq’s invasion of Kuwait. The sanctions remained in place after the Iraqi army was expelled, on the grounds that Iraq’s weapons of mass destruction would need to be destroyed before they could be lifted.

The sanctions greatly restricted Iraq’s ability to export oil and therefore to import supplies of food and medicines, prompting international concerns that the country’s children were being particularly hard hit.

In 1995, the UN Security Council passed the first of several resolutions designed to ease conditions in Iraq by permitting the sale of oil, known as the Oil for Food Programme.

But negotiations with Saddam Hussein’s government were slow, and in 1999, Unicef and the Iraqi government jointly carried out a major national household survey (ICMMS) to assess child mortality.

“The survey results indicated that children in the centre and south of the country were dying at over twice the rate of 10 years earlier,” write the experts.

They add that Unicef’s executive director noted that there would have been “500,000 fewer child deaths during 1991-98 had the fall in mortality of the 1980s continued through 1991-98.”

In 2000 more detailed figures emerged, which estimated that between the periods 1984 and 1989 and 1994 and 1999, the average under 5 death rate rose from 56 to 131 deaths per 1000.

Annual estimates indicated a rise in child mortality in the centre/south of the country from 59/1000 to 116/1000 between 1990 and 1991, rising again to 142/1000 by 1998.

The ICMMS survey results were used to both challenge and support the case for the invasion of Iraq in 2003, and were cited by the then prime minister Tony Blair in his 2010 testimony to the Chilcot Inquiry, say the experts.

“It is now known, however, that the ICMMS results for the centre/south of Iraq were a deception,” they write. But this fact has received virtually no publicity or attention.

Surveys undertaken since 2003 have found no evidence that child mortality was unusually high compared to the 1980s, estimating the under 5s death rate at around 40/1000, say the experts.

“The [ICMMS] data were evidently rigged to show a huge and sustained—and largely non-existent—rise in child mortality,” they write, suggesting that the falsification might have occurred at the data entry stages or as a result of the coercion of field workers by the Iraqi authorities.

The widespread feeling that the UN’s economic sanctions were wrong helped to perpetuate the deception, they say.

And they conclude: "The rigging of the 1999 Unicef survey was an especially masterful fraud. That it was a deception is beyond doubt, although it is still not generally known."