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016294

U.N. uncertain on Iraq

The U.N., which has been involved with Iraq for decades, may maintain a key humanitarian role

Peter Sur
Freelance Reporter

The humanitarian crisis created by the fall of Saddam Hussein's regime presents the largest challenge in Iraq today, a U.N. spokesman said.

"The most important aspect of the conflict now is the safety of the civilian population and the humanitarian situation," said Stephan Dujarric, a spokesman for the U.N. Secretary General.

"We've seen the breakdown of law and order over the past few days, which has resulted in the looting of food warehouses and much more importantly, of hospitals that have been stripped of medical supplies (and) medical equipment," he said.

Dujarric declined to estimate the cost of rebuilding Iraq, but he said the United Nations has appealed for more than \$1.5 billion, most of which would go to food aid.

Since Hussein became president in 1979, Iraq has had a combative relationship with the United Nations.

After the Gulf War ended in 1991, the Security Council passed resolutions that called on Iraq to end the repression of its civilians and to destroy all chemical and biological weapons and ballistic mis-

siles with a range of more than 93 miles. The Security Council demanded Iraq open its borders to humanitarian aid, and it established the U.N. Special Commission (UNSCOM) to oversee the disarmament process, according to the U.N. Web site.

From June 1991, when the weapons inspections started, to Dec. 1998, each side accused the other of lying. UNSCOM condemned Iraq for restricting access to suspected weapons sites. Iraq, in turn, accused UNSCOM of including U.S. and British spies in its inspection teams.

The inspectors left Iraq in 1998 in advance of four days of U.S. airstrikes on military targets and suspected weapons sites.

Ultimately, UNSCOM uncovered an extensive chemical and biological warfare program and supervised the destruction of 30 missile chemical warheads, 760 tons of chemical weapons agent and more than 38,000 filled and empty chemical munitions, according to the U.N. Web site.

U.N. weapons inspectors were absent from Iraq until late last year, when the Bush administration began pressing Iraq to disarm its weapons of mass destruction.

In November, the Security Council passed Resolution 1441, which called for "immediate, unimpeded, unconditional and unrestricted access" to buildings, equipment and records, along with private interviews with Iraqi officials. The resolution warned of "serious consequences" if Iraq failed to comply.

Dujarric said weapons inspectors

returned to Iraq on Nov. 27, 2002, under the authority of the United Nations Monitoring, Verification and Inspection Commission (UNMOVIC).

"They did discover some weapons and some traces of weapons," Dujarric said. He said he could not assess whether the inspectors were successful because "they have not finished their work."

Meanwhile, on the humanitarian front, the United Nations administered the Oil-for-Food program, which began in Dec. 1996. The program allowed Iraq to sell its oil and use the proceeds to meet the needs of its people. The program has distributed more than \$25 billion in humanitarian supplies and equipment to Iraq, according to the U.S. Department of State.

Last month, the Security Council became the target of intense lobbying efforts as the United States pushed for a new resolution concluding Iraq had failed to comply with Resolution 1441. When it became clear the resolution would not pass, the United States withdrew it and prepared for war.

Despite the United States' apparent circumvention of the Security Council, it remains "extremely relevant," according to political science Professor Jane Cramer.

"The U.N. is going to be critical to winning the peace," she said. "We have to give them the central, main role in rebuilding Iraq."

However, Students for Peace member Alexander Gonzalez said the U.N.'s role, if any, would only be humanitarian.

"It would most likely have nothing to do with restructuring and rebuilding the country," he said.

He said whatever humanitarian aid the United Nations could provide in Iraq would be insufficient, considering the destruction from the two U.S.-led wars.

According to Dujarric, the members of the Security Council would decide any political or economic role for the United Nations in rebuilding Iraq.

"The important issue is that the Iraqi people themselves be given the chance to choose their own leaders and to become again the masters of their own fate," Dujarric said.

Peter Sur is a freelance writer for the Emerald.

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