

# LETTER FROM BAGHDAD

BY SAN BRIM

The following is a letter from peace activist San Brim sent to the Cowlitz County (Washington) Public Citizens. She wrote it Thursday, February 4 from Baghdad and reported on conditions there.

Dear friends, Greetings from Baghdad. It is very late here and I am sleepy. The hotel will not stop playing the theme from *The Last of the Mohicans* over and over again and we have had an exhausting day. And once again I will try to give you some idea of what it is like to be in Iraq during this time. And once again, as I have little time, this may be somewhat disorganized. But first I just have to share some very strong impressions.

It becomes clear so quickly here that the Iraqis are not and cannot prepare for war. They wait for the terror to come as helpless as any people have ever been. They are totally unprepared. They are severely lacking medically and only have food to last three months. They have nowhere to go and if Team Bush does as they have threatened, and Baghdad is "leveled to the ground," they will have murdered five million helpless people. These people are sitting ducks. The U.S. is the biggest military might in the world. The Iraqis are a depleted people, stripped of all economic support and without resources. The word 'genocide' had been raised by some of the humanitarian workers here and as the days pass I see it also. It is the murder of a whole people.

Do you remember the old movies of Christians being thrown out into the coliseum to be killed by lions? It seems a little like that from the view from here.

The insidious nature of the sanctions become more and more apparent as we go deeper into the society and see the lives of everyday people. Every person in Baghdad receives rationed food. Iraq cannot supply its own people under the sanctions. The UN oversees the "Food for Oil" program and people receive ration papers based on the number of persons in a family. At one time the Kurds in the north grew wheat which was sold throughout Iraq. But with the sanctions they can no longer sell directly in Iraq. Without a market they have stopped growing the wheat. An ancient agricultural tradition dies as the fields grow dusty. And a culture begins to wane.

People are beginning to come to us for medicine. A waiter needs cough syrup for his little boy. A woman is waiting for us at the hotel for vitamins for her children. Someone's uncle has pneumonia and needs antibiotics. (The waiter has tears streaming down his cheeks and you can see it is humiliating for him to ask.)

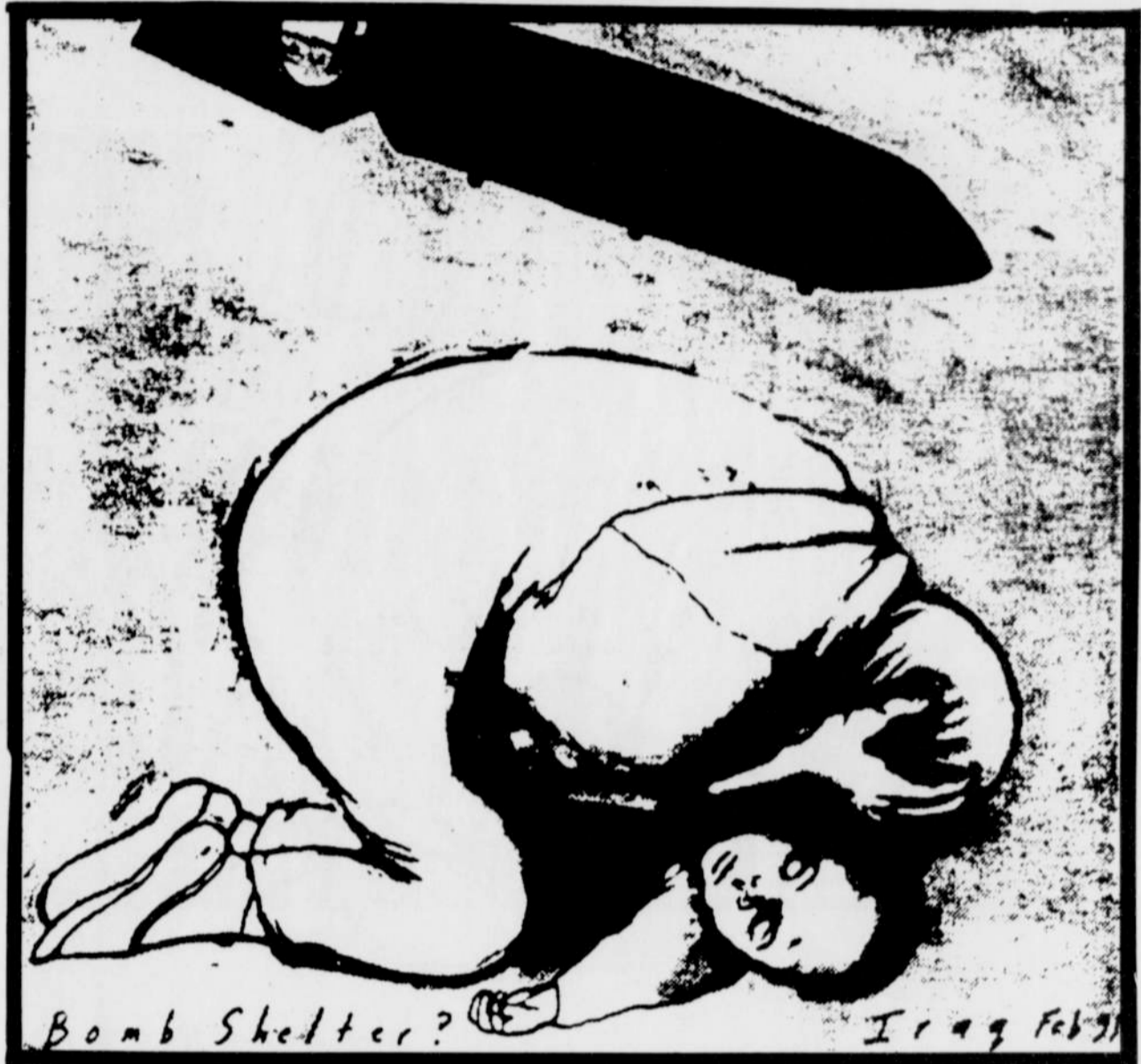
Today we saw a part of the food distribution, visited an orphanage and walked in a very poor neighborhood where we were mobbed by children.

Yesterday was a very difficult day as we went to a bomb shelter which was hit in February 1991. It was filled with over a thousand people, mostly women and children. 480 died. The shelter was a very long concrete structure built into the ground. The walls were at least six feet thick made of concrete and rebar. The shelter was two stories deep into the ground. We were told that the people came there from the surrounding neighborhood to feel safe. They made their beds on the floor and slept during the bombing of Baghdad. At 4:30 in the morning a rocket sliced open the roof of the shelter and exploded. A few minutes later another rocket bore in through the hole made by the first and went through the second level. From the survivors we hear that there was horror and chaos. People in the immediate area were incinerated on the spot. As the inferno grew the temperature was estimated to reach 450 degrees. All along the floor of the shelter you can see the marks of incinerated bodies. You can see the shape of the person and sometimes even the features of the face. I will tell you the hardest thing was to see a mother and her child, a black blotchy outline and smears of blood, etched into the floor. I just could not imagine it. There are photos of the victims on the walls and you cannot help but look at the outlines etched on the walls and floor and the photos and wonder, "Was that her?"

And I wonder exactly who shot that rocket. Does he or she know the horrible result. What officer gave the command? Who authorized this?

Another thing that is becoming clear is the resignation of the people here in Baghdad. They seem to believe that it is inevitable they will be bombed; that war is coming and they will be destroyed. I have come to recognize this kind of sigh when they speak about the coming onslaught. A little shudder. It is difficult for them to talk about the future. Or perhaps it might be better to say a future.

I have never spent time with people anywhere without hearing about plans for the future. "This child is planning to go to the university" or "This summer we hope to take a vacation" or "Tomorrow I will see my friend" or whatever. People in Iraq don't speak about the future. At first I just could not figure it out,



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what was lacking in conversations. There was a missing element. It was the future. They do not know if they will have a future.

When they speak of this inevitable war they just hope that somehow they and their families might survive. They know that within a few weeks they will lose friends; perhaps family. You can see that parents are overly protective of their children. There is this desperation. And you can see that they want to believe that we can somehow help them. "You are Americans, perhaps you can speak to the President and explain that we are no threat."

Today we went to a restaurant high above the city. As we were looking out at the city a young man approached two of us. He wanted to know why Americans wanted to bomb Iraqi people. We tried to explain the oil thing and he kept on asking, with a genuine innocence, "Why?" We could tell that he really thought we knew something and could explain it to him. It just did not make sense to him and he really wanted to understand.

It's gotten out that there are these American women in town who are working for Peace. Everywhere we go we get a thumbs up. We flash the peace sign and they flash it back. Sometimes we are treated almost like celebrities, with people coming up in the streets and thanking us. Men in suits, women in chadors, young men and women in jeans with hip haircuts, they all take a moment to thank us. They tell us they know it is not the American people who want to bomb them. They are

completely lacking in hostility. When we say we are from the United States at first there is surprise and then immediately a smile.

Last night three of us also met with this totally wonderful group of 43 Spanish actors, dancers and singers. They plan to take over their embassy here. They completely embody the word "vivacious". After we had talked awhile and described our work here and in the U.S., one of the reporters with them began to ask us about the American people. Why were they allowing this to happen? How could they tolerate this action by our President? Don't Americans read? How is it possible that Americans would allow their government to commit this horrible atrocity and not take action? Whoa, these were such hard things to describe. And we never did completely satisfy their questions. Maybe we don't fully understand it ourselves.

There are many Europeans here. Members of the European Parliament are here. They are all outraged and radical. They speak of the American "Bully" and in one press conference yesterday the U.S. was described as arrogant and "full of itself." It's kind of the way I see it. It's embarrassing when you see the common view Europeans have of people in America.

We are moving about the city a lot and seeing many things. Orphanages, hospitals, etc., and meeting with officials of various programs. There has not been time for small quiet talks with Iraqi people. We are moving fast.

I am with Diane Wilson. She is a fourth generation fisherwoman from the Texas Gulf coast. She has spent the last 15 years fighting environmental pollution. She has tied in the environmental issues to this war very nicely. Tonight we were talking about the reality that if we had developed or were in the process of developing alternative energy, there would be no Iraqi war. Without the need or greed for oil, we would not be bearing down on these people to take control of their oil.

Thursday we go to Babylon. We will spend the day with a family and see their buffalo farm. Doctors Without Borders are here and tomorrow morning we will meet with them. Every night here as I go to sleep I cannot help but think of faces of children I have seen that day. I think of them being put to bed by their parents and how it will be if the bombing starts. It is beyond the imagination that these little children are seen as so expendable, "acceptable collateral damage." What kind of monster finds that acceptable. All for oil.

And I cannot help but think of that one young man who looked at me so direct and asked with such urgency, "Please help us."

Good night all. Peace.

## LETTER TO CONGRESS

To all of Oregon's Congressional delegation:

We, as patriotic Americans, should acknowledge right now that certain prerequisites should be imposed when (apparently not if) American armed forces are to be engaged in a war with Iraqi armed forces. Congress should legislate to make sure that "Freedom of the Press" as described in the First Amendment of the Bill of Rights is in effect during this war. America must demand that the Press have complete freedom to record and report on the "progress" of the war. The Bush/Cheney administration will certainly attempt heavy restrictions on any information that exits the war zone. They will institute strong censoring of printed or oral reports and censor filmed accounts of the battles (especially scenes that might bring the war home).

You, as the elected representatives of the citizens of Oregon, must make sure that parents and families know the truth about their sons' and daughters' fates. Most of you voted against this obsessive campaign against an historic personal nemesis. Nonetheless, neither you nor the President or any of his advisors, save perhaps Colin Powell, have any idea of the effect that the mutation in America's international strategy will have on the world. When it occurs, not only America but the rest of the world must be informed of the terrible events as they happen.

You may think I am an over-reacting peacenik. I'm not. I am a decorated combat infantry veteran. Indeed, I served at the same time our President was bravely defending our border from Mexican imperialistic intentions. With that in mind, I must say that no matter how many Hollywood movies or CNN news clips or History Channel specials concerning war that you or the President's advisors might review, until you have smelled last night's battlefield, you have no real idea of the horror! Add thousands of civilians....I won't go on. But if you truly want peace and really abhor war, you will at least assure a free press in "Bush's War".

—RON BETTS

Ron Betts is president of Want'um Fisheries, Inc., in Waldport. He is a Vietnam veteran and formerly Oregon State Coordinator of the Vietnam Veterans Against the War.

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