

Don't Believe The Fear-Hearted

By Philip Hunt

“The weight of opposition to the projected war with Iraq baffles explanation,” intones John Keegan (Opinion, *The Age*, 16th January).

Perhaps only Keegan is baffled. And perhaps that is because it is easier to be dismissive of arguments against the war, than to consider their logic.

The facts, as usual, can speak for themselves. And, despite the unsupported assertions of Keegan and his ilk to the contrary, the evidence is strong that a war against Iraq is likely to be costly. It will cost many human lives, mostly not soldiers. It will cost many billions of dollars.

Those anxious for war may assert that “estimates of millions of death in a war this year are fantasy,” but there is careful analysis behind such predictions. The analysis comes, not just from a few religious groups or anti-war protesters, but from within the United Nations and associated agencies themselves.

This month, MedAct, a group associated with the World Health Organisation, published estimates of the likely “collateral damage” if there is a battle for Baghdad. Their work builds on a confidential UN report, reported in the British Press last December, but only recently released.

Once upon a time, only soldiers were killed in war. Perhaps this was bad enough, but during the last century the ground shifted. Now the vast majority of victims of war are ordinary people. In the Newspeak of the military it is called “Collateral Damage.”

The MedAct report is cautious, well-researched and authoritative. MedAct began with a baseline. They looked at the known collateral damage from the 1991 Gulf War.

In popular imagination this was a clinical military operation with few lives lost. The pro-war argument tends to rely only on estimates of military deaths. The actual figures are sobering.

A UN report in 1993 estimates that between 142,500 and 206,000 people died directly as a result of the 1991 Gulf War. Almost two million people lost their homes and became refugees in their own country. And more than 350,000 children died from malnutrition and untreated illnesses since the war.

The 1991 war itself cost around \$US82 billion. The main contributors were Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Germany and Japan. Ironically, most of the US expenditures were reimbursed by its allies.

Clean-up and reconstruction costs after the Gulf War were between \$US150 and \$US200 billion. Roughly eight times what it would cost to provide annual health care for **all** the world's poor.

What do the experts say will happen if there is a battle for Baghdad?

The MedAct report estimates between 48,000 and 261,000 dead, of which 180,000 will not be soldiers. As few as 375,000 injured, but perhaps as many as 3.9

million (in the case of a nuclear attack). We all hope that a nuclear attack is only a very remote possibility, so it is right to treat this latter number with caution.

In addition, 200,000 could be affected by the ensuing health crisis caused by, among other things, cancer-causing pollution from burning oil wells, refineries and chemical plants.

Cities will be in ruins. Roads, airports, railways, homes, hospitals, sewer systems, factories, food delivery networks devastated. The result will be disease epidemics.

The UN's own report, now available on a UK web-site (www.casi.org.uk), estimates:

- Half a million people needing medical treatment as a result of direct or indirect injuries;
- 39% of the population (almost 10 million people) will need to be provided with water to survive;
- Over 3 million people will need to be supplied with food for survival. This number includes more than 2 million malnourished children under five;
- Almost one million Iraqis will leave the country as refugees. The United Nations High Commission for Refugees "will initially be unable to provide the support required".

Once again, the world will be faced with an enormous clean-up bill, mostly not to be borne by those who created the mess.

The MedAct report is careful not to recommend a Do-Nothing response to Iraq. The alternatives to war are by no means exhausted. The report provides a long list of alternatives, including:

- Smart sanctions that target the Iraqi elite rather than the innocent poor;
- Allowing time for the weapons inspections to work;
- Creating a better containment system to prevent weapons from entering Iraq—the present system is neither transparent nor credible;
- Improving the humanitarian conditions of ordinary Iraqis, by focussing on long-term development rather than short term feeding;
- Developing local capacities for peace by working with the peace-makers within the society;
- A range of measures to improve international security, since national security is impossible without international security.

The full MedAct report is available at www.medact.org.

Of course, those in favour of war rarely want to consider the long-term consequences. War is becoming more and more efficient and clinical. The after-effects, unfortunately, are becoming more widespread and damaging.

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