

## Story: U.N. Warns of Possible Humanitarian Crisis, 3/24/03

### ***Continued battles in southern Iraq prevent the distribution of humanitarian aid.***

Aid workers warned Monday that the conditions for Iraqi residents in some parts of the country may start to deteriorate, now that battles in the south have isolated several cities.

#### **The situation in Basra**

The situation is most dire in Basra, Iraq's second largest city, where more than 1.5 million people live. Electricity and water have been cut off for the past three days, according to the **International Committee for the Red Cross**. It is not clear whether allied bombing or the Saddam Hussein's forces were responsible for the power outage.

Kofi Annan, the Secretary General of the United Nations, said that it was critical that the water and electricity be restored in Basra.

"I have heard a report from the Red Cross that the people in Basra may be facing a humanitarian disaster in that they have no water and they have no electricity," he said. "A city of that size cannot afford to go without electricity or water for long. Apart from the water aspect, you can imagine what it does for sanitation."

#### **Obstacles to aid**

The flow of relief supplies was supposed to be secured by the take over of the port city of Umm Qasr, which has access to the Persian Gulf and ships containing food and fresh water. However continued sporadic fighting has left the situation too insecure for relief workers to begin using the port.

British officials said they have a ship, the Sir Galahad, six hours away and ready to go. Once they can get into port, they hope to open 12 aid distribution centers in Umm Qasr.

A spokesman for **UNICEF**, the United Nations organization that will take a lead role in reestablishing the water supply, said the group had established emergency plans for dealing with a possible crisis in Baghdad, but, because of a lack of funding, they had not been able to put emergency provisions in Basra.

Gen. Tommy Franks said Monday that only half the mines had been cleared in the port, and on the ground soldiers continued to fight pockets of Iraqi soldiers. Still, he was

confident that aid would only be slightly delayed.

"I think what you'll find is that the people of Basra will, in the days ahead, be able to have more access to food and more access to water than they have had in decades," he said. However he said it would impossible to tell when the fighting would end and relief could start the trip up north to Basra.

## **Other factors**

Meanwhile, in northern Iraq, the U.N. refugee agency reported that a first group of 14 Iraqi refugees fleeing fighting in the city of Mosul entered Syria over the weekend. They were taken to an existing refugee camp at El Hol, about 100 km from Al Yarubiyah.

While there were no other reports of refugee arrivals in other countries bordering Iraq, the UN refugee agency and neighboring governments continue to prepare for a possible refugee influx.

In an interview with the NewsHour, Andrew Natsios of the **U.S. Agency for International Development** said that because residents stocked up on food before the war, he did not expect massive population movements in the next few weeks. He said when they do start to move, it will become a bigger problem, as "people become very vulnerable to food shortages and health problems when they leave their homes."

## **Vocabulary**

**International Committee for the Red Cross (ICRC)** - (n.) is an impartial, neutral and independent organization whose exclusively humanitarian mission is to protect the lives and dignity of victims of war and internal violence and to provide them with assistance. It directs and coordinates the international relief activities conducted by the Movement in situations of conflict. It also endeavours to prevent suffering by promoting and strengthening humanitarian law and universal humanitarian principles. Established in 1863, the ICRC is at the origin of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement. (<http://www.icrc.org/eng>)

**UNICEF** - (n.) Created by the United Nations General Assembly in 1946 to help children after World War II in Europe, UNICEF was first known as the United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund. In 1953, UNICEF became a permanent part of the United Nations system, its task being to help children living in poverty in developing countries. Its name was shortened to the United Nations Children's Fund, but it retained the acronym "UNICEF," by which it is known to this day. (<http://www.unicef.org/index.html>)

**U.S. Agency for International Development** - (n.) a government agency providing US economic and humanitarian assistance worldwide. (<http://www.usaid.gov/>)

