

#03-2

Inspectors and assurance: why deadlines defy logic

*Ernie Regehr
February 2003*

In the current “Showdown Iraq” frenzy, it is easy to lose sight of the real job facing the Security Council – first, to give the international community reliable assurance that Iraq’s weapons of mass destruction do not present an imminent and egregious threat to international peace and security, and second, to confirm the final elimination of such weapons.

In the first of these tasks, the inspections are close to an unqualified success.

In a worst case development, Iraq would acquire nuclear weapons and the means to use them against its neighbours, but the most certain accomplishment of the current inspections regime is to preclude precisely that from happening. If there is one point of agreement around the Iraq crisis, a consensus that includes the White House and peace demonstrators, it is that Iraq does not now possess nuclear weapons. And if there is one point of agreement among experts on the inspections process, it is that it will not be possible for the regime to make any undetected progress towards the development of nuclear weapons as long as the IAEA inspectors are present as part of the On-going

Monitoring and Verification Process as mandated by the UN Security Council.

The next to worst case threat is the possibility that Iraq could weaponize still hidden chemical and biological agents and mount them on delivery systems with the means to use them against its neighbours. And the second major accomplishment of current inspectors is to preclude that development as well. Significant levels of chemical and biological weapons are not yet accounted for, but, by the testimony of experts, as long as UNMOVIC inspection teams are in place Iraq will not be able to undetectably weaponize any chemical and biological agents it still has and mount them on missiles, which are proscribed by the Security Council.

In other words, the most imminent Iraqi threats to international peace and security are effectively neutralized by the inspections, which the Security Council, aided, to be sure, by the threat of force, has put in place.

A third serious threat, as the Bush Administration rightly warns, is that chemical and biological weapons, which are not accounted for, could be diverted to non-state

terrorist organizations. But the danger of that happening actually rises exponentially in the event of war. The fog of full-scale war would radically increase both the possibility and the motive for such undetected diversion. Detection, though difficult, is much more likely under current monitoring arrangements than under war conditions when all inspectors have been withdrawn.

The work of inspectors in Iraq actively diminishes these threats and diffuses the clear and present danger that could warrant a UN resort to force to restore peace and security, the Security Council's primary Charter mandate for such force. Inspectors in Iraq are thus agents of assurance, which makes current efforts to set limits on their stay there eminently illogical and even dangerous. Rather than being subject to pull-out deadlines, inspectors need to be made permanent.

In the interests of international peace and security, which is the Security Council's primary responsibility, the present Iraqi regime must be the subject of ongoing monitoring, until all weapons of mass destruction have been accounted for and destroyed, until the Government of Iraq permanently disavows such weapons, and until the world community is confident that its disavowal is credible.

Before any such a disavowal can be regarded as credible, however, the inspectors and diplomats have a lot of work to do.

The French-German proposal to increase the number of inspectors could increase their effectiveness. Improved intelligence cooperation from the United States and all states with relevant capabilities would certainly assist their efforts.

The long-term presence of inspectors and monitors will require the ongoing political/diplomatic support of the Arab world, and as the climate of crisis recedes that

support will increasingly depend on evidence that the international community's commitment to non-proliferation is not selective. Equity and political sustainability both require that the weapons of mass destruction programs of other states in the region, notably Iran and Israel, also become the subject of credible diplomacy and Security Council attention

To sustain the long-term disavowal of weapons of mass destruction throughout the region will require that the security environment itself be transformed. A reinvigorated diplomatic effort involving states of the region to address outstanding issues, notably the Israel/Palestine conflict, in the context of region-wide talks on security and cooperation in the Middle East, is essential.

The international community could also do much more, through diplomacy and political engagement, including material support for Iraqi civil society, to advance respect for human rights and to promote accountable governance.

But for Iraq to be transformed into a pro-disarmament state that respects human rights, something dramatic must obviously happen. The question is not whether regime change is needed, but who does the changing. It is a job for Iraqis, supported by an international community willing to re-open the question of sanctions.

It is clear that sanctions cannot simply be lifted as long as the regime withholds full cooperation with inspectors, but the international community must face up to the fact that sanctions have imposed an extraordinary political, as well as humanitarian, price on the people of Iraq. The political price is in a radically weakened civil society, the primary source of a credible challenge to the current regime and of alternative visions for the future of Iraq. Measures to ease the burden of sanctions on

the civilian economy while imposing tougher and more focussed sanctions on the regime are needed if indigenous regime change is to become possible.

Inspections have gone a long way toward meeting the Security Council's key obligation to deal with Iraq's immediate threats to international peace and security. Progress is being made on the second objective, Iraq's

permanent and credible disavowal of weapons of mass destruction.

All of which begs the question, why choose war when alternatives are available and already working?

Ernie Regehr is the Director of Project Ploughshares.

Project Ploughshares is an ecumenical agency of the Canadian Council of Churches, formed to implement the churches' imperative to pursue peace and justice. The mandate given to Project Ploughshares is to work with churches and related organizations, as well as governments and non-governmental organizations, in Canada and abroad, to identify, develop, and advance approaches that build peace and prevent war, and promote the peaceful resolution of political conflict.

"and they shall beat their swords into ploughshares, and spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation; neither shall they learn war any more" (Isaiah 2:4)