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Human rights in the balance

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The human rights situation in Iraq is being invoked with unusual frequency by some western political leaders to justify military action. This selective attention to human rights is nothing but a cold and calculated manipulation of the work of human rights activists. Let us not forget that these same governments turned a blind eye to Amnesty International's reports of widespread human rights violations in Iraq before the Gulf War. They remained silent when thousands unarmed Kurdish civilians were killed in Halabja in 1988.

Not only have the people of Iraq continued to suffer at their hands of their government - systematic torture, extrajudicial execution, "disappearances", arbitrary detention and unfair trial - they have also borne the brunt of the UN sanctions regime since 1991. Sanctions have jeopardised the right to food, health, education and, in many cases, life of hundreds of thousands of individuals, many of them children. There are claims that the Iraqi regime is deliberately manipulating the sanctions regime for propaganda purposes - but that does not absolve the United Nations Security Council from its own share of the responsibility for failing to heed the calls to lift all sanctions provisions that result in grave violations of the rights of the Iraqi population.

As the Council deliberates on the use of military force, it must consider not only the security and political consequences of its action, but also the inevitable human rights and humanitarian toll of war: civilians who will be killed by bombing or internal fighting, children who will die because sanctions will make access to basic necessities and humanitarian assistance even more difficult. Yet, concern for the life, safety and security of the Iraqi people is sorely missing from the debate, as is any discussion on what would be their fate in the aftermath of conflict - and even less, what will be the knock-on effect on the human rights of the people of neighbouring countries.

As the keeper of international peace and security, the UN Security Council has the responsibility under the UN Charter to seek a solution through peaceful means first. It must remind its most powerful member that force is the last resort and only to be carried out in full compliance with international law. It must ask if we have really reached that point of imminent danger which leaves no other choice. It must never forget that the United Nations was created to preserve peace and promote human rights, not encourage war.

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