

NO WAR ON IRAQ!

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ACCORDING to the leader of a political party that still describes itself as democratic socialist on its membership card, I and the one to two million other people who marched on February 15 will have blood on our hands unless a war is waged against Iraq in the near future.

In the week running up to the biggest popular demonstration this country has ever seen, Tony Blair saw fit to remind us that we would not be able to protest if we lived in Baghdad. So why did culture secretary Tessa Jowell try to ban the march from rallying in Hyde Park?

Blair and his cabinet colleagues have made much of Saddam Hussein's appalling human rights record, and in particular the gas attacks on the Kurdish town of Halabja in 1988. So, why did Blair and many of his current cabinet colleagues fail to sign the parliamentary motions in circulation at the time condemning the attacks? Amnesty International has been highlighting human rights abuses in Iraq for years now, but their demands for justice have fallen on deaf ears with successive British governments.

Blair states that there is a moral case for war because the only alternative is to continue with sanctions that have killed hundreds of thousands of children. What choice is there between rapid death and slow death?

According to the United Nations more than half a million Iraqi children have died as a result of sanctions – a price worth paying according to former US secretary of state Madeleine Albright. A once middle-income country has seen its economy destroyed by punitive rules that only allow one export – oil – and which deny the importation of “dual use” goods including cancer treatments.

Oil revenues are held in a UN account and food has to be imported rather than sourced internally, resulting in vital funds leaving the country entirely rather than benefiting Iraqi farmers and then going into general circulation. The international community, in its concern for the Iraqi people, has crippled the country's economy.

Prior to a new war, hundreds of UN staff currently responsible for distributing food rations to the entire Iraqi population will be evacuated – leaving nobody to verify food imports and pay

the suppliers. Food shipments on the high seas will go elsewhere, in search of countries that will pay them. The Iraqis will go hungry.

60 per cent of the Iraqi population relies totally on this basic monthly ration of staple foodstuffs for survival. It costs \$200 million per month to keep the system going. 45,000 Iraqi food agents distribute the food from shops all over the country.

When we bomb Iraq, who will verify the arrival of food and pay for it? Who will distribute food when bombs are raining down and roads and bridges are destroyed? And who will have blood on their hands when the 24 per cent of Iraqi infants suffering chronic malnourishment are joined by their older brothers and sisters, and their mothers and fathers, in their suffering?

Blair tells us we are going to war to rid Iraq of weapons of mass destruction. He says this as weapons inspectors are engaged in that very activity. But where is the logic in withdrawing these inspectors and dropping our own weapons of mass destruction on a country that has posed no threat to its neighbours since the Gulf War in 1991?

Blair talks of the dangers of chemical and biological warfare. What is bombing electricity stations, rendering water pumps useless and sending raw sewage streaming onto the streets of Baghdad and Basra, if not biological warfare? What is denying essential cancer medicines to Iraqi children, and leaving depleted uranium shells scattered across southern Iraq, if not chemical warfare?

The same UN resolution that first called for the disarmament of Iraq also demanded a Middle East region free of weapons of mass destruction. So when can we look forward to the disarmament of Israel and a fair settlement for the Palestinians?

Blair and Bush talk about creating democracy in Iraq. And yet the British foreign office when questioned have said that their aim is “stability”. They are not the same thing. In Afghanistan the people enjoy neither. And nor should Blair presume to give lessons in democracy when he has overseen its destruction within his own party, or indeed Bush, who governs the world's only superpower without a democratic mandate. ■