The Human Costs of the Gulf War
Will History Repeat Itself in Iraq?

As policy makers and the public in the US and former Gulf War coalition countries weigh the pros and cons of launching a second war against Iraq, it is important for people to take into consideration the public health costs of the first war on the people of Iraq.

In presenting these facts about the Gulf War, we seek to debunk the myth that this war greatly minimized civilian casualties. It did not. What it did minimize was our ability to see the dead and wounded. As Dr. Bernard Lown, IPPNW’s founding Co-President, wrote in 1991, “The military’s media strategy for the Gulf War was vastly different from Vietnam. No more body counts or napalmed children . . . Avoided were the acres of rubble of World War II. No images of Dresden, Tokyo, or Leningrad to wrench emotion, mobilize moral outrage, or evoke sympathy. It was a ‘techno-war.’ Media coverage focused on the high-tech wizardry of the aerial blitzkrieg. The televised images defined the war as a game, fostering the illusion of safe, bloodless playing fields while a Third World country was being dragged back to the last [19th] century.”

For the people on the ground in Iraq, the war was not a game, and their losses were great. The book War and Public Health, co-published in 2000 by the American Public Health Association and Oxford University Press, reported useful but little-known estimates of the casualties. The book was edited by IPPNW’s former Co-President Dr. Victor Sidel and former IPPNW Executive Director Dr. Barry Levy. The facts below are from the chapter “Public Health and the Persian Gulf War” written by Dr. Eric Hoskins.

More than 80,000 tons of explosives dropped by coalition forces led by the US killed between 50,000 and 100,000 Iraqi soldiers.

Between 2,500 and 3,500 innocent civilians were killed during the air campaign, and 9,000 homes were destroyed.

The civilian death toll in 1991 — after the massive bombing campaign was stopped — rose to 111,000 people. Shortages of medicine and damaged health facilities contributed to this high rate of “delayed mortality.”

Of these 111,000 deaths, 70,000 were children under 15 years of age. These deaths were caused by health effects resulting from the destruction of Iraq's civilian infrastructure, especially electricity-generating power plants, which led to a breakdown in water purification and sanitation. This breakdown caused outbreaks of infectious diseases such as cholera, typhoid, malaria, polio, and hepatitis.

UNICEF has documented that the combined effects of the Gulf War and over a decade of economic sanctions have resulted in the deaths of 500,000 children due to malnutrition, diarrhea, and other preventable diseases.

Landmines, unexploded ordnance, and anti-personnel bombs have added thousands of victims to the numbers of physically handicapped children in Iraq, especially amputees. These injuries not only affect the physical and emotional development of the child but also diminish the prospects of work,
marriage, social life, self-support, and dignity for the adult.

The psychological impact of the war has had damaging and lasting effect on many of Iraq’s 8 million children. They have little hope for the future and are anxious, fearful, and uncertain.

Twelve years ago, IPPNW helped to document the costs of the first Gulf War led by the first Bush Administration. We worked with hundreds of other peace organizations to prevent and then stop that war. We exposed what the war planners euphemistically call “collateral damage” by publicizing the health and environmental effects of a war in which hundreds of thousands of people lost their lives.

We are now faced with the challenge of helping to prevent another US-led war on Iraq by the second Bush Administration — one that is likely to be far more devastating than the first. We urgently need to raise our voices so that this does not happen.

IPPNW urges all Americans — and indeed all policy makers and citizens in countries that the US will ask to support another war against Iraq — to remember the human costs as they consider whether going to war with Iraq again is the right thing for their country, the people of Iraq, and the world.

A new war on Iraq will be fought by the young men and women in our countries’ military services. It will be fought with our tax dollars. While US and allied military casualties were light compared to Iraqi military casualties, about 350 soldiers were killed, and more than 25,000 veterans are suffering from "Gulf War Syndrome." Some analysts predict that US and allied forces would sustain thousands of casualties in another war.

If you believe as we do that war is not the way to resolve disputes with Iraq, we encourage you to use our messages about the human costs of war in letters to government officials and in letters to editors of newspapers and magazines. Please send us copies of your published letters. And please share this fact sheet with your friends, family, and colleagues. We need your help to stop another war on Iraq.

Resources
To learn more about IPPNW’s work to stop the war against Iraq, please see visit our website at www.ippnw.org

To order a copy of War and Public Health, please call the American Public Health Association (APHA) at 301-893-1894 or e-mail them at apha@tascol.com. The book is US $23.50.

IPPNW’s Finnish affiliate, PSR-Finland, has published War or Health? — a wide-ranging examination of the interface between warfare and human health and society. It is available from IPPNW for US $25.00.