Shock and aid: Letter from Baghdad

by Jonathan Frerichs in the May 17, 2003 issue

The air is thick with politics. Reportedly some 60 different political groups have emerged here since the end of the war. Driving around Baghdad, one suddenly comes upon a building surrounded by men with guns. Groups are staking their postwar claims to the real estate. In one case, the soldiers turned out to be members of a Kurdish party. The Shi‘ite Muslims have been among the quickest to grab a share of the territory.

The streets are busy, the traffic horrible. The few policemen one sees stand in groups, apparently afraid to work alone. One hears reports of revenge killings. Gunfire is heard at night. No one is in charge. The U.S. troops are in defensive positions and rarely leave their razor-wire outposts. To the extent public order exists, it is due to the good behavior of citizens.

In this setting, the church does best to serve at the most basic level, avoid being sucked into politics, and engage in activities that can’t be misconstrued. Any hint of having a mixed or political agenda is deadly. One thing dictatorships like Saddam’s are good at is teaching people to detect shams and scams. Without locals to vouch for them, aid groups may be asked to leave. The Iraqis are exerting their newfound freedom, and they are in no mood to suffer further abuse or neglect.

In the northern reaches of Baghdad, on the outskirts of Saddam City, is a kind of wildcat settlement called Hai El Mahdi, home to some 20,000 people, mostly Shi‘ites who migrated here from the south. For 35 years Saddam’s government refused to recognize the existence of this impoverished city. With the blessing of the local Shi‘ite cleric, a German nongovernment organization was able to set up a health clinic on April 29, and it has plans to build another. “We have wanted to start clinics and build a water system here for nearly two years,” said Alexander Christof, head of a German NGO called Architects for People in Need. “We were not allowed. The government told us this settlement does not exist.”

Mothers brought children with thin arms and limp hair; some of the infants can’t hold up their heads—signs of chronic malnutrition. These are the people at the low end of

the government’s ration scheme, which fed 16 million people in the country—two out of three Iraqis. These mothers have been fighting their own war against chronic disease and malnutrition for years.

Christof’s work is supported by a coalition of U.S. church groups, All Our Children (which includes Church World Service, the Mennonite Central Committee, the National Council of Churches, Lutheran World Relief, Oxfam America, Stop Hunger Now, Jubilee Partners and *Sojourners* magazine). He plans to build four more clinics in poor neighborhoods and turn them over as soon as he can to the Iraqi health department.

On the other side of Baghdad, 125 Palestinian families settled into tents—the world’s newest Palestinian refugee camp. When the war ended, these families were chased out of their homes because people resented the favoritism shown them by Saddam’s regime. Some 35,000 Palestinians have lived in Iraq since leaving their homeland in 1948.

When they heard that the camp supplies came from America, a few of the Palestinians refused to accept them. They relented after someone from the Muslim liaison group explained that the gifts were not from the U.S. government but from Americans who cared about their plight.

On Orthodox Good Friday, April 25, I attended services at the Armenian Orthodox church. The beautiful Orthodox liturgy moved seamlessly into a remembrance of the Armenian genocide of 1915 at the hands of the Turks (usually marked on April 24). This community has been in Baghdad since then, an island of Armenian language and culture that preserves one of the most ancient church traditions.

The Armenian Orthodox I spoke with were largely untouched by the war, though one man told me about an Iraqi missile battery that had been set up in his backyard. On the day U.S. troops captured the Baghdad airport, he said, the troops manning the battery took off their uniforms and fled.

For many people, the looting and destruction that followed the war have been worse than the war itself. Food and hygiene articles from North American churches were being supplied to two institutions hit hard by the looting. At Al Rashad psychiatric hospital, all 1,015 residents fled during a chaotic three days when looters stripped the hospital down to the wires in the wall. Some 700 residents are still missing. All Our Children was also offering food, supplies and counseling to an orphanage

alleged to have been looted by the staff itself. It is now under the control of a Shi‘ite mullah.

About the American occupation, I have heard the full range of opinions, some expressing joy, some dismay. But repeatedly I have heard Iraqis say that they need assistance, not occupation, that they are an educated people who have been oppressed.

The sight that has stayed with me most is of the mothers coming to the clinic in Hai El Mahdi. These Shi‘ite mothers, dressed all in black, had probably never met a foreigner before, certainly not a male foreigner. I was conscious that they were meeting us more on our territory than theirs. They came to the clinic because during the years under Saddam, and during a decade of sanctions, nobody had ever offered them medical care. Now a war had occurred, and in the rough logic of the world, we had the opportunity to help.