

Lessons from the Gulf crisis

By Brian Martin*

How could nonviolence be used to stop Saddam Hussein? That is a question that many people have asked me since the development of the Gulf crisis. Since I have been promoting nonviolent action as an alternative to military methods for many years, people expect me to come up with an answer to all the problems created by the war system.

Let me respond to some of the questions I've been asked.

Surely you oppose the deployment of Australian military forces in the Gulf?

Yes, but it's a bit of a side issue. Just being against Australian involvement doesn't provide any positive alternative. There has to be a way to actively oppose ruthless military regimes such as Iraq.

Isn't the main thing the hypocrisy of Western governments launching a crusade against Iraq when there are many other causes of aggression that have not been 'punished'?

The hypocrisies are indeed blatant and numerous.

Western governments did nothing to oppose the Indonesian invasion of East Timor, the US invasion of Panama, the Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza Strip, or indeed the Iraqi invasion of Iran. There was silence about Iraqi use of chemical weapons against the Iranians and against the Kurds in Iraq.

But what is new? International relations are a politics of power, not of principle. Pointing out hypocrisies does not provide a solution to the real problems of aggression and abuse of human rights.

What's your solution then? Surely nonviolent methods couldn't stop an invasion?

Some useful precedents

There are some useful precedents. For example, in 1968 Soviet bloc forces invaded Czechoslova-

kia to smash 'socialism with a human face'. There was no military resistance.

Instead there were rallies, attempts to win over Soviet soldiers, delays in rail transport of equipment and a general refusal to cooperate.

The Soviet government had planned to install a puppet government within a few days but was unable to do so for eight months. The unified nonviolent resistance severely weakened Soviet legitimacy around the world in a way that no violent struggle could have.

The Czechoslovak resistance was spontaneous. A preplanned nonviolent resistance would involve appropriate technological infrastructure, extensive training and development of links with sympathetic groups in many other countries, all of which would considerably improve the capacity for deterrence and defence.

Are you saying that the Kuwait people should have opposed the invasion by concerted non-violent action? Surely it would have been fruitless?

Enormous inequality

Kuwaiti military resistance was fruitless. Nonviolent resistance was a possibility in principle but not in practice. The main reason is that Kuwait never was a unified country. It was built on enormous inequality and exploitation. Few Kuwaiti people would have risked their lives to defend their rulers.

Nonviolent resistance depends on support from the people. The largely nonviolent Palestinian Intifada against Israeli rule has been effective because of widespread support from the Palestinian people.

What about the boycott of trade with Iraq? That's a form of nonviolent action isn't it?

Right, boycotts are an important method of nonviolent action.

But the trouble is, this boycott was backed by a military blockade. There had been a massive military build up and threat of invasion. These military measures served to

mobilise greater support for Saddam Hussein within Iraq.

So what would you do that is different?

The weakest part of the Iraqi military state is the loyalty of the Iraqi people. Saddam Hussein was and is a ruthless dictator, killing opponents and crushing any form of internal opposition.

Authoritarian regimes are vulnerable to collapse if enough people refuse to cooperate. That is basically what happened in Eastern Europe in 1989. It was also the basic process behind the Iranian revolution of 1978-79: concerted nonviolent opposition eventually won over enough of the troops so that the regime collapsed.

The time to oppose the Iraqi regime was in the 1980s, or even earlier. However, Western powers were supporting Saddam Hussein massively. During the 1980s the Western peace movement gathered enormous support but the focus was on nuclear weapons. The Iran-Iraq war didn't attract all that much attention.

You mean that nothing much can be done using nonviolent action now?

Actually, there are some things being done. The courageous non-violent activists of the Peace Camp on the Saudi/Kuwaiti border are doing something, going into the Gulf region to try to prevent the outbreak of fighting.

Billions of dollars

But remember that governments spend billions of dollars and deploy massive human and material resources on military methods. The proponents of nonviolent struggle have only tiny resources by comparison.

The Gulf crisis was created by those powerful governments that provided arms and legitimacy to ruthless dictatorships. To expect the peace movement to step in and provide a magical solution now is wishful thinking.

It sounds like you think it is completely hopeless.

The main lesson is to take action now to prevent the "next time". A key thing is to oppose repressive, dictatorial governments. This is a big challenge. Western governments continue to support brutal regimes in Latin America, Africa and Asia. Examples range from China to Guatemala.

Repressive governments need to be opposed whatever their political persuasion or their alliances. Support should have been given in the late 1980s to the people of Iraq, Iran and Kuwait, among others, against oppressive rulers.

People need to take action

Since many governments support these regimes, people need to take action independently of governments.

This means doing things like writing letters, making public statements, supporting actions by trade unions and other organisations, joining boycotts, communicating with opponents of regimes through organisations such as churches and corporations, sponsoring refugees and communicating via short-wave radio.

Some actions of this sort are being taken by groups such as Amnesty International, Article 19, War Resisters International, International Fellowship of Reconciliation and Peace Brigades International. Their efforts do make a difference.

However, compared to the resources spent on international trade, diplomacy and warfare, the development of ways for people to take action against repression in other countries is rudimentary.

The invasion of Kuwait and the Western military response represent a massive failure in the Gulf - a failure to develop nonviolent methods to prevent and oppose aggression.

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Obituary

Don Elder

One of the largest gatherings in recent years took place on January 7 at a funeral service for comrade Don Elder who had succumbed to a long and distressing illness.

In the crowd were young and old communists and socialists, trade union members and officials including from the Queensland

Trades and Labor Council, Don's neighbours and his friends in the peace movement. They came to comfort Allie, Don's wife, and their children Pat, Don and Des and their families.

Wilf Ardwill, on behalf of the Miscellaneous Workers Union (MWU), delivered the eulogy, paying the highest tribute to Don's work for the union movement and the MWU in particular.

The feelings of all who knew Don well could hardly be better expressed than in the words of comrade Laurie Aarons in a letter to Allie:

"Don was one of the rare human beings who seemed to lack most of the faults the rest of us have. He was modest, unpretentious and deeply kind in his relations with other people.

"He was courageous and steadfast, never turning away from a struggle or backing down from the principles which guided his life and work, a person of deep integrity and a living example of a true socialist and fighter for human liberation."

Like everyone who knew him, I have fond memories of Don. He

was one of the most outstanding communists who maintained organisation and activity in the Port Moresby area during the rough days of 1942 and 1943. In addition to being a good gunner, Don kept up sales of Tribune and pamphlets, proving himself one of the best by selling his literature to every man in his unit, from the Colonel down.

Although we deeply mourn his death, we should be glad that he was spared the knowledge of the outbreak of another catastrophic war in the Middle East.

Ted Bacon

Jqin Hands

Saying no to war

Of the 224 members of federal parliament, 12% are women; 5.3% of parliamentarians voted against or abstained from voting for the war. Of these, 50% were women.

Wendy Fatin, the Minister assisting the Prime Minister for the Status of Women was not one of them.

Jeanette McHugh, the member for Phillip, was. Phillip is in the eastern suburbs of Sydney and covers Bondi, a centre of Jewish settlement in Australia. Her difficult and principled decision should be applauded.

But does the women's movement have a position on the outbreak of war in the Persian Gulf? Women were certainly prominent as organisers of and speakers at the anti-war rallies in the last weeks. And the Union of Australian Women and WILPF have been taking anti-war actions since the crisis began. But there is no feminist group focussing women's political energies on the Gulf crisis. Perhaps, as several women said last week, while there is strong feminist presence at the marches and actions against the war, there are no generalist women's groups anymore.

On the other hand Eva Cox and Helen Leonard have been contacted this week by hundreds of women wanting to know what is being done. They have put out a statement which says in part:

"We as a group of Australian women believe that the war now being fought in the Middle East is neither just nor justifiable. While we acknowledge the many injustices which create anger deserve remedies, we cannot see that war will produce solutions.

"War is about death, about winning and losing, about weapons and technology, power and powerlessness. From wars come more injustices and pain through dominance and subjugation. These are not ways to solve problems which have their origins in past wars and conflicts.

"If women allow men to make war with the weapons that can kill humanity and the planet, we too are guilty.

"We need to stop the Gulf war before the destruction created puts us all at hideous risk. We need to act on behalf of our children and on behalf of the women and children who have no say in what is happening, of those who have believed the men when they said that they could win. No one wins wars."

- Brenda ★

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