

Gulf's front-line peace camp

By DR BRIAN MARTIN

Seven Australians left yesterday to join hundreds of international non-violent activists at a peace camp in the desert between Iraq and Saudi Arabia.

Their aim is to prevent a Gulf war.

The Australians joining the Gulf Peace Team are committing a massive act of faith. They hope Iraq, United States and its allies will be less likely to fight if civilians from many countries are in the way.

The members of the peace camp are opposed to all military aggression, they opposed the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait.

The Gulf Peace Team is the latest in a long line of non-violent interventions.

In India, the successors of Gandhi set up the Shanti Sena, a non-violent army — this inspired the later establishment of the International Peace Brigades.

The Peace Brigades send skilled non-partisan non-violent activists into conflict areas, they have gone to countries such as Guatemala and Sri Lanka.

Members of Peace Brigades may try to promote dialogue or use mediation techniques — just being present helps reduce violence.

It may seem crazy to think non-violent methods could bring down a dictator such as Saddam Hussein, even the economic blockade had to be backed by naval forces.

Australians join non-violent push

Yet there have been some successes of non-violent action against repressive regimes. In 1944 the dictatorship of Maximiliano Hernandez Martinez in El Salvador ended after a non-violent insurrection.

The revolution against the ruthless Shah of Iran in 1978-79 took place by popular uprising rather than armed struggle.

Unfortunately, the revolutionary Islamic government became just as ruthless as the Shah.

It seems obvious the time to act against Saddam Hussein was in the 1970s and 1980s, when he waged war against Iran and exterminated thousands of Iraqis, including using chemical weapons against Iraqi Kurds.

Saddam Hussein's weakness during this time was the questionable loyalty of his own people. A lot could have been done to help his opponents and undermine the regime: letters, radio broadcasts, boycotts, world publicity about human rights abuses.

Instead Saddam Hussein received massive support from the United States, the Soviet Union and many others,

they provided him both diplomatic recognition and weapons.

Indeed, until the invasion of Kuwait, the United States Government indicated to him it wouldn't intervene.

Saddam Hussein's powerful military operations thus were funded and supported by governments now opposing him.

The main lesson here is for the future. There are other brutal regimes engaged in war and killing their own people — yet many of them are given political, economic and military support by governments, including the Australian. This must change, otherwise there will be more Saddam Husseins in the future.

The Gulf Peace Team is a last-ditch effort to use non-violent methods to oppose war. Its efforts probably would not be required if non-violent techniques had been used much earlier.

The peace camp on the Iraq-Saudi Arabia border is not for the faint-hearted, non-violent action takes as much courage as violent action — any volunteers?

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● MORE GULF NEWS — P14



● Wollongong University's Dr Brian Martin is backing a peace camp aimed at averting a Gulf war.