

IRAQ

PEACE IS POSSIBLE, WAR IS NOT THE ANSWER!

So rang out the voices of 5,000 citizens in one of the largest, if not the largest demonstration ever held in Wollongong.

It strengthened my conviction that even at this late stage, war with Iraq is neither inevitable nor in Australia's national interest. To say so does not mean that I'm anti-American nor that I fail to understand the importance of the Alliance. Any constructive relationship should be based on mutual respect and not subservience.

The Iraqi Government, headed by Saddam Hussein, is a militarised authoritarian regime, which has a shocking record of abuses of human rights, including execution of trade union leaders and political opponents. He is guilty of horrendous atrocities against his own people. All of that is well understood by the people of Australia and widely condemned.

It is understandable that the world has grown even more anxious about the use of biological and chemical weapons by terrorist organisations post the horrendous September 11 and Bali tragedies. But would a war on Iraq guarantee no repeat of those horrendous events?

Could not these agents of destruction be sourced from other countries? Remember the use of ricin in the subway attacks in Tokyo in 1995. Recently, Jack Straw, the UK Foreign Secretary affirmed that he had:

“seen no evidence to link the Iraqi regime with Osama bin Ladin, Al Qaeda or the Taliban.”

While it appears that stores of chemical and biological agents remain in Iraq there is no evidence that Iraq has a nuclear weapons capacity.

Iraq is only one of several countries, which has produced anthrax in recent years. It is important that the current inspection regime verify that the stocks of this highly toxic agent are destroyed.

Australia has played a leading role in recent years in trying to introduce a verification regime into the Biological Weapons Convention and is to be commended for that.

Why then has the United States been one of the key countries blocking these efforts?

The hypocrisy of the leading ‘hawk’ in the U.S administration, Donald Rumsfeld, is hard to understand. In December 1983 Rumsfeld, then a special envoy to the Middle East, travelled to Baghdad to inform Saddam Hussein that the United States was ready to resume full diplomatic relations with Iraq.

The resumption of diplomatic relations was proposed despite warnings from the State Department that Iraq was engaging in “almost daily use of chemical weapons” in the war against Iran. There is no doubt that U.S corporations along with British, French, German and others assisted Iraq’s weapons build up, including biological agents.

My great fear is that a war on Iraq, which has as its aim the elimination of weapons of mass destruction, would provide an even greater rationale for their further proliferation and give oxygen to the growing threats posed by international terrorism.

We all remember the images of burning oilfields during the Gulf War: but what if military action ignites more than oil and sets the politics of the Middle East ablaze.

Further fuelling the fires of violence that are already consuming the Region will only exacerbate the intense hatreds, strengthening extremist ideologies and breeding further global instability and insecurity. Is this what we want? Will such an outcome be in the best long-term interests of our nation and its people? I believe not.

All peaceful and diplomatic means to compel Iraq to comply with UN Security Council Resolutions have not yet been exhausted. Of interest in this regard is the statement by the Catholic Bishop for Wollongong, at Saturday’s rally that His Holiness the Pope is due to meet Tariq Aziz.

The ‘hawks’ in the Bush Administration argue in essence for a preventative war so it is not surprising that they seek to exaggerate Iraq’s capabilities and to inflate the risk. But in my view recourse to war is not justified given there is no evidence of an imminent threat to any country, let alone Australia.

I am heartened to hear of the latest proposals advanced by Germany and France as a credible alternative to war - a strategy of vigilant containment.

Such a position has been advanced by a number of respected academics, including Stephen Walt, from the John F. Kennedy School at Harvard, who concluded a perceptive analysis with these words:

“Both logic and historical evidence suggests a policy of vigilant containment would work.”

Enormous power is vested in the UN Security Council for the resolution of international disputes. Due and consistent process provides for the exercise of a veto power on the part of any permanent member, a power that has previously been exercised on many occasions by the United States. I await the final outcome of the Weapons Inspectors Report due to be presented on February 14 and the Security Council’s response to it.

Finally, I share the sentiments expressed in a recent Oxfam document and I quote from it:

“It is very difficult to see how a military strike on Iraq can be justified, nor indeed how such an attack could be waged without violating international humanitarian law.”

Article 54 of Additional Protocol 1 of the Geneva Convention prohibits attacks upon “objects indispensable to the survival of the civilian population.” In Iraq, this includes ports, roads, railways and power lines. The Convention states, “in no event shall actions against these objects be taken which may be expected to leave the civilian population with such inadequate food or water as to cause its starvation or force its movement.” Given this, it is difficult to see how an attack on Iraq cannot fail to violate international humanitarian law.

The long-suffering and innocent citizens of Iraq must be given hope that there are alternatives to both dictatorship and war.

A war would have unacceptable humanitarian consequences including large-scale displacement of people, more refugees, the possibility of civil war and major unrest across the entire region.

The World Health organisation estimates 100,000 direct and 400,000 indirect casualties of war with pandemic outbreaks of cholera and

dysentery. The number of people requiring medical treatment is estimated in a UN Report to be as many as 500,000. In their total population of 26.5 million people, 13 million are children, of who already some 2 million are moderately malnourished, and they, along with 1 million pregnant and lactating women are particularly vulnerable to disease and death. Their water and sanitation system is already on the verge of collapse with 500,000 tonnes of raw effluent pumped into fresh water sources daily.

An estimated 900,000 refugees will require assistance – 100,000 immediately with as many as 500,000 people in transit camps on Iraq's borders.

And at the end of the war, and who knows how long it will take to impose a regime change, there will be the massive task of reconstructing and rebuilding a devastated nation. The rebuilding of Iraq is estimated by the UN Development Program at a cost of about \$50 billion.

But regime change it seems from the Afghanistan experience is no guarantee of a decisive change for the better in the lives of ordinary people; at least not in the short term.

There is a credible alternative strategy to force Iraq to comply with its obligations. Such a policy of even more vigilant and interventionist containment would spare the innocent citizens of Iraq from the potentially horrendous impacts I have referred to.

In the absence of any imminent threat from Iraq to another nation, let alone Australia and its people we should give the peaceful alternative ever chance of success.

As best as I can assess, the people in my community do not support Australia's involvement in the war against Iraq.

I am in this Chamber to give political voice to the sentiments expressed in Wollongong on Saturday. I will continue to do so in both my Caucus and in the Parliament.

I believe that peace is still possible and war is not the answer.