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Books to Iraq Appeal

Editors: Your readers will be interested to know of the initiative by Anthony Cox and others called Books to Iraq which Labour Friends of Iraq is pleased to support. It's best to take a gander at the Books to Iraq website <http://www.bookstoiraq.org.uk/>

The Chair of Labour Friends of Iraq, Dave Anderson MP, has tabled a Commons Motion which summarises the appeal. It reads, in the rather arcane language of Commons motions, as follows:

That this House believes that Iraq has given the world a great legacy of pharmaceutical and medical knowledge; notes that in addition to the recent conflict and continuing violence, two wars and 12 years of sanctions have had a crippling effect on Iraq's pharmacy education and practice, severely affected access to information resources such as books and journals and imposed a total isolation from the international scientific community; and supports the new initiative Books to Iraq, www.bookstoiraq.org.uk which has been created by pharmacists who wish to contribute to rebuilding Iraqi schools of pharmacy by raising money to send them a range of medical and pharmaceutical textbooks because the safe supply of drugs and drug information is an essential tool of public health which will directly help Iraqi universities, academics and students and indirectly help the wider Iraqi population as well as help replenish the knowledge that Iraq held for humanity in the past.

The labour movement – and wider society – needs an increasing range of initiatives such as this which seek to provide practical assistance to Iraqis in a wide range of fields and to thereby ease the longstanding isolation of Iraq from the rest of the international community. Anthony's splendid initiative rightly makes the point that we all owe Iraq considerable debts for its historic contributions to our collective civilisation. I hope that your readers will support Books to Iraq but also come up with similar initiatives, in their own fields of endeavour.

Gary Kent, Director, Labour Friends of Iraq

End the Silence Over Chechnya

Editors: It is extremely difficult for an honest observer to break through the closed doors that separate Chechnya from the rest of the world. Indeed, no one even knows how many civilian casualties there have been in ten years of war.

According to estimates by non-governmental organizations, the figure is between 100,000 (that is, one civilian out of ten) and 300,000 (one out of four). How many voters participated in the November 2005 elections? Between 60 and 80 percent, according to Russian authorities; around 20 percent, reckon independent observers. The blackout imposed on Chechnya prevents any precise assessment of the devastating effects of a ruthless conflict.

But censorship cannot completely hide the horror. Under the world's very eyes, a capital – Grozny, with 400,000 inhabitants – has been razed for the first time since Hitler's 1944 punishment of Warsaw. Such inhumanity cannot plausibly be described as 'anti-terrorism,' as Russian President Vladimir Putin insists. The Russian military leadership claims to be fighting against a party of 700 to 2,000 combatants. What would be said if the British government had bombed Belfast, or if the Spanish government bombed Bilbao, on the pretext of quelling the IRA or the ETA?

And yet the world remains silent in the face of the looting of Grozny and other Chechen towns and villages. Are Chechen women, children and all Chechen civilians less entitled to respect than the rest of mankind? Are they still considered human? Nothing can excuse the seeming indifference displayed by our worldwide silence.

In Chechnya, our basic morality is at stake. Must the world accept the rape of girls who were kidnapped by the occupying forces or their militias? Should we tolerate the murder of children and the abduction of boys to be tortured, broken, and sold back to their families, alive or dead? What about 'filtration' camps, or 'human firewood'? What about the villages exterminated to set an example? A few NGO's and some brave Russian and Western reporters have witnessed countless crimes. So we cannot say 'we did not know.'

Indeed, the fundamental principle of democracies and civilized states is at issue in Chechnya: civilians' right to life, including the protection of innocents, widows, and orphans. International agreements and the United Nations Charter are as

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binding in Chechnya as anywhere else. The right of nations to self-determination does not imply the right of rulers to dispose of their people.

The fight against terrorism is also at stake. Who has not yet realized that the Russian army is actually behaving like a group of pyromaniac fire-fighters, fanning the fires of terrorism through its behaviour? After ten years of a large-scale repression, the fire, far from going out, is spreading, crossing borders, setting Northern Caucasus ablaze and making combatants even more fierce.

How much longer can we ignore the fact that, in raising the bogeyman of 'Chechen terrorism,' the Russian government is suppressing the liberties gained when the Soviet empire collapsed? The Chechen war both masks and motivates the reestablishment of a central power in Russia – bringing the media back under state control, passing laws against NGO's, and reinforcing the 'vertical line of power' – leaving no institutions and authorities able to challenge or limit the Kremlin. War, it seems, is hiding a return to autocracy.

Sadly, wars in Chechnya have been going on for 300 years. They were savage colonial conflicts under the Czar and almost genocidal under Stalin, who deported the whole Chechen population, a third of which, perished during their transfer to the Gulag.

Because we reject colonial and exterminating ventures, because we love Russian culture and believe that Russia can bloom in a democratic future, and because we believe that terrorism – whether by stateless groups or state armies – should be condemned, we demand that the world's blackout on the Chechen issue must end. We must help Russia's authorities escape from the trap they set for themselves and into which they fell, putting not only Chechens and Russians, but the world at risk.

It would be tragic if, during the G8 summit scheduled for St. Petersburg, Russia, in June 2006, the Chechen issue were pushed to the side. This dreadful and endless war needs to be discussed openly if it is to end peacefully.

André Glucksmann, Václav Havel, Prince Hassan Bin Talal,
Frederik Willem De Klerk, Mary Robinson, Yōhei Sasakawa, Karel
Schwarzenberg, George Soros and Desmond Tutu