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CAN is a primary national student anti-war network, with over 150 campus member organizations. It is a democratic, grassroots and student owned and operated network that has earned international recognition. It was invited to join a recent peace delegation organized by United for Peace and Justice, Global Exchange and Occupation Watch.

For photo-journals on CAN's history, see http://traprockpeace.org/student_activism.html

We must demand an end to the occupation now

THE FIRST evidence that I saw of the U.S. invasion of the Middle East came before I had even gotten there. While waiting to get on my last flight, from Amsterdam to Amman, Jordan, I was surprised to hear several voices speaking English with southern U.S. accents. I looked up to see a group of five or six Americans waiting for the same flight. I wondered why they were flying to Jordan. The answer came in the three letters clearly printed on one of their identification tags: “KBR”—the initials of Kellogg, Brown & Root, a subsidiary of the huge oil services corporation Halliburton.

Halliburton—whose former CEO is Vice President Dick Cheney—has received billions of dollars in no-bid contracts for the so-called “reconstruction” of Iraq. Not long after I returned, Halliburton wrote a \$6.3 million check back to the U.S. government—after admitting that an executive had taken a multi-million-dollar kickback from a Kuwaiti company. At the airport, I noticed another group of KBR workers sitting a few rows away. It looked like the majority of people on the airplane were Americans, and among us were many workers for KBR.

FROM AMMAN, we had a 13-hour drive to Baghdad, since no commercial airlines are flying into Iraq. On the road, our driver Tareq told us of the frustration and anger that he and other Iraqis feel toward the U.S. occupation of their country. Like many other Iraqis I would meet, Tareq initially felt hopeful that the U.S. invasion and overthrow of Saddam Hussein's regime would bring an end to years of war and suffering. Since the invasion though—in which one of Tareq's brothers was killed—he has become bitter and angry as the U.S. failed to reconstruct the infrastructure, bring work, provide stable access to electricity or clean water, or create any security for Iraqis. Tareq told me that he and other Iraqis “just want to live.”

“I love my home, and I want to live here,” he said. “But we don't want the Army USA.”

After crossing the border into Iraq, we got our first sighting of U.S. troops. Sticking out of the top of an armored vehicle, sitting behind a huge gun and wearing a ski

mask, the first soldier I saw looked terrifying. I could only imagine how Iraqis felt to see these troops patrolling their country. There was another such vehicle in front of the first, and we soon saw the reason for the troops' presence on the road—stretched out in front of them was a long convoy of oil tanker trucks. Two more Army escort vehicles drove in front of the convoy.

AS WE neared Baghdad, I began to see more and more with my own eyes what this occupation looks like. Not far from Baghdad is the Abu Ghraib prison, which was notorious under Saddam Hussein's regime. It is now a main detention facility for the U.S. Seeing the prison—with its high walls, guard towers and rows of razor wire—took my breath away. Activists at the Occupation Watch center in Baghdad have spoken with detainees released from Abu Ghraib, who tell of the misery inside the prison. Essentially, the prison consists of four walls and a huge yard inside, which is filled with plastic tents. These are where the prisoners stay—in the 120-degree days of summer, and the 30-degree nights of winter. We would pass Abu Ghraib again, and each time, we saw groups of Iraqi men and women gathered outside, looking for loved ones who might be detained inside.

Entering the city, the first thing that I saw was a long line of cars waiting for gasoline. In Baghdad, it is not unusual for drivers to have to wait hours for gas. According to several people I met, many people show up at gas stations at night with blankets, so that they can sleep in their cars to get gas in the morning. This would be hard to imagine in the U.S., and until the occupation, it was inconceivable in Iraq, which has the second-largest proven oil reserves in the world. Iraqis are well aware of how oil-rich their country is—and are infuriated with the fact that they must wait hours for gas that is *imported* from outside of the country by the U.S.

"This is why Iraqi people are angry at Army USA," Tareq said, as he pointed at the line of cars. "Why?" he asked.

Once inside Baghdad, the havoc caused by the U.S. invasion and occupation was overwhelming. Traffic is completely chaotic, with most of the traffic lights I saw out, due to a lack of electricity—and the few that were on are disobeyed. There is barbed wire everywhere, as shopkeepers surround their businesses with it to ward off criminals and looting—another sign of the lack of security. We passed the "Green Zone," headquarters of the Coalition Provisional Authority and home of U.S. overseer Paul Bremer. There were rows of barbed wire, tanks, machine gun nests, and signs saying "NO PHOTOGRAPHY." The sight exposed the notion that the U.S. has come in peace for the purpose of bringing democracy—and made it clear what the U.S. presence in Iraq really is: a dictatorial military regime.

What overwhelmed me most upon entering Baghdad, though, was seeing bombed-out buildings everywhere—among them, a supermarket, a building for theater and television production, an apartment building. The evidence of economic sanctions—the 13-year-long trade embargo that the U.S. imposed on Iraq through the United Nations—was also everywhere, and more widespread than the damage from the invasion. Under the sanctions, all kinds of basic goods—from medicine to construction materials—couldn't be imported into Iraq. The result is that Baghdad, clearly once a majestic city, is falling apart. Buildings are crumbling, and there are pools of sewage in the streets because of damaged sewer systems. Instead of reconstruction, this is what people in Baghdad see every day: incredible *destruction*.

WE MET with people from the Occupation Watch center, who designed our itinerary and accompanied us during the week. Our first arranged meeting was with an Iraqi family who lost a loved one to U.S. forces. The family invited us into their home, and the brother of the man who was murdered told us the story. The US troops came at 3 a.m. They used to tanks to block off the street where the home that they planned to raid was. The soldiers moved in, one of them kicking down the outside door of the house. The man who lived there, Ahmed Khalif Salman, opened the front door, and a soldier shot him in the chest immediately. The soldiers brought him—still alive—outside to lie bleeding in the front yard. Then, the soldiers ordered everyone out of the house and ransacked it, stealing money and jewelry, and breaking furniture. One of Ahmed's sons told us how the soldiers tied up him up. When they were done, the soldiers wrapped Ahmed's wound, dragged him by his feet to a vehicle, threw him in and drove away.

The family didn't know where their husband and father was taken, and they searched for him at detention centers and hospitals. They finally learned that Ahmed had died, and that the soldiers had dropped off his body at a hospital. Ahmed was 46 years old and had five children. Fadela, Ahmed's wife, told us, "Every family is suffering from this occupation."

Throughout the week, we heard other stories about U.S. raids and Iraqis being detained. The details are all the same: the soldiers come in the night, kick down the door, order everyone outside, loot the house, take the father or son, and leave. I thought of the families that I spoke with as I watched President Bush's State of the Union Address and heard him talk about U.S. forces conducting "midnight raids" in Iraq. All the army needs as grounds for a detention is an accusation that an Iraqi is part of the resistance. These families don't know where to go to find their loved ones, and there is no recourse for U.S. abuses. Ahmed Khalif Salman's family, for example, went to the Coalition Provisional Authority to make his murder known—and the CPA did nothing.

In addition to meeting with the families of loved ones who have been detained or killed under the occupation, we met with others who told us horror stories from the U.S. invasion last spring. In the U.S., we were told that the invasion was conducted with "surgical" precision—and that while mistakes were made, civilians were safe for the most part. Not according to Vivian Salim. On April 7, 2003, Vivian's neighborhood came under attack by U.S. bombers. She and her husband Nadeem got their children together and fled the area by car. As they turned down one street, though, they found a U.S. tank in their path. The tank opened fire on the car, killing everyone except for Vivian. When we asked if the tank had fired any warning shots, Vivian broke down crying—as she told us that the tank's first shot landed in her son's face.

DURING THE week, we had the opportunity to visit two hospitals and meet with several doctors.

We met a young surgeon while touring Khadhimya Hospital, one of the best in Iraq. He told us of the horrors of running the hospital during the U.S. invasion, when the majority of civilians who he operated on were victims of cluster bombs. The hospital would lose power at times—and at one point during the winter, it lost heat. The hospital is located in an area at a low elevation, so the sewer system was designed to pump sewage uphill. But after deteriorating from neglect under the sanctions, the pumps broke one by one. At one point, the doctor said he found himself operating as he stood in a pool of sewage. The hospital lacks some of the most basic equipment—including that needed for the sterilization of instruments, so the doctors wash their tools in tap water.

They have pleaded with the Ministry of Health for assistance, but are still deprived of basic necessities. One of the most striking things about the occupation was the contempt of U.S. authorities. A clear example came when we drove past Baghdad's Shaheed Monument. This powerful sculpture is a memorial to Iraqis killed in the Iran-Iraq War, a catastrophic conflict that affected every family in Iraq. The monument is very significant to Iraqis—the only thing comparable in the U.S. is the Vietnam Wall memorial in Washington. But now, the monument is occupied—and used as part of a U.S. base.

The arrogant, all-powerful attitude with which the U.S. Army brass is running its occupation infects U.S. soldiers, too. Far from home, stuck in a foreign place and living in constant fear of the people who they're told that they are "liberating," some troops are directing their frustration at Iraqis. I saw, for example, soldiers driving down the street on patrol and pointing their guns at children. Others, though, are just tired of being in Iraq and are counting the days until they can return home. I spoke with one group of military police, resting between dispatches. They were from the Missouri National Guard Reserve, and never expected to be deployed. Most of them were fathers, with jobs and lives back home, and they were waiting to get out of Iraq. A couple had already done tours of duty in Germany, and now were doing another in Iraq. I also spoke with some soldiers at the Green Zone, and they seemed tired and bored, and wanting to go home.

I saw something interesting, though. There were big barricades all around the entrance of the Green Zone, where many soldiers hang out and stand guard. Written on one of the barricades in permanent marker were the letters "FTA." During the Vietnam War, "FTA"—which stands for "fuck the army"—was a slogan of resistance to the war among soldiers. It came to embody the anger of young men who were being used as cannon fodder for Washington's ambitions around the globe.

AMONG IRAQIS, the feeling overall is a sense that they have no control over their country or their lives. Whenever they drive, they are subject to U.S. checkpoints—or are forced to defer to the constant U.S. patrols. Their electricity comes and goes. With unemployment around 70 percent, work is scarce. I saw no evidence of reconstruction whatsoever, and it appears that all U.S. forces are doing in Baghdad is conducting patrols and house raids, killing and detaining people. The only aircraft in the sky are U.S. helicopters or airplanes, flying overhead with guns aimed at the people below.

I don't mean to portray the Iraqi people I met as one-dimensional victims. On the contrary, they do the best that they can to go about living their lives—and they do so with warmth, laughter and dignity. The problem is that the U.S. occupation places obstacles in their way at every turn, and these confront Iraqis every day. People who have tried to avoid conflict, or who have given the U.S. the benefit of the doubt, feel betrayed and are confronted by the occupiers on a daily basis.

Such is the logic of colonialism: it breeds anti-colonialism.

As one professor told us after lamenting the indignity of living under occupation, "Sooner or later, we will all join the resistance." Most of the Iraqis I met told me that the occupation has gotten much worse since the invasion, and they believe that there is still worse to come. This is why we in the United States must demand an end to the occupation now. There can be no compromise: U.S. out now!