

A MESSAGE TO THE WORLD

From Archbishop Gabriel Kassab of Basrah, Iraq

Greetings to you from Basrah, Iraq!

Greetings to you from Ur, City of Abraham!

Greetings to you from the peaceful, helpless people of southern Iraq!

Greetings to you from a land blessed by God with natural beauty, wealth and strategic location, which unfortunately made it a target in two destructive wars: the Iran-Iraq war of 1980 to 1988 and the Gulf war in 1991.

This great land was subjected to mass destruction of its civilisation as well as its people, especially in the southern part of the country, Al-Basrah, which was the centre of all attacks and wars. From here, I stand before you as an eye witness to what happened to this area, the southern part of the country, or what we refer to as Al-Basrah. I am not going to elaborate on what happened to the area in the Iraq-Iran war where I witnessed more than four hundred bombs fall on this city in one day. But I will tell you today about what I have been witnessing for the past six years as Archbishop of the Archdiocese of Al-Basrah. Due to the embargo, the sanctions, the life of the whole city has been paralysed. Malnutrition due to scarcity of food has become a major reason for mental and physical retardation, especially for small children and new-borns.

- Scarcity of medication has become a direct cause for a dramatic increase in the number of chronic diseases and deaths, especially among the elderly and the children. It has been very difficult, if not impossible, to provide medical help for those who need it, even during emergencies. Lack of medical devices and medications leave doctors and hospitals helpless when it comes to performing operations or emergency work. Surgeries have been done without anaesthesia or pain relievers.
- Unsanitary water conditions were a direct cause for many communicable diseases to appear and spread after they had been eradicated decades ago. This will affect generations and generations.
- Lack of electricity for long hours daily has become another reason for abnormal and unhealthy life conditions. Factories and manufacturers stopped operating. Small workshops had to close down and most household electrical equipment is ruined. In addition, the lack of electricity prevents school children from having proper studying conditions. Many students have had to drop out of school because they could not afford school supplies, clothes and shoes. Many drop out of school so they can help support their families.
- School conditions are unhealthy and unsanitary: windows without glass, classes without chairs or desks, offices without necessary supplies. Our students in many schools sit on the floor or use milk crates to sit on and study in their classrooms. There is no maintenance of any kind; the situation is miserable.
- In the hospitals the conditions are unbearable not only due to scarcity of medical and sterile supplies, but also due to the unavailability of medical devices and

machines needed for simple daily use in any basic hospital (for example syringes and needles).

- What can I say about the sewer system and the dirty water which fills our streets and many times our homes? And I can tell you much more about our miserable life and all the problems that we face every day.

Our social life has been destroyed. Many psychological and mental problems are spreading widely day after day through the people, especially between our youngsters. Worry and stress are causing nightmares for everyone, especially our children.

The number of very poor families increases by the day. Job opportunities are impossible and the jobless rate is very high. Signs of poverty and malnutrition are apparent on everyone's face. There is begging in our streets and searching garbage cans. Children perform disgraceful acts and do jobs that are not allowed or accepted anywhere else in the world. It is an unbearable situation, improper and unjust for any human being anywhere in the world.

Brothers and sisters, I stand before you today to give you a small picture of all the negative aspects of life that we have to encounter and live through every day as a whole country, and especially in southern Iraq, in Al-Basrah. And it is no secret to anyone in the humanitarian organisations that the way we live our lives is simply inhumane and unacceptable to any just person. What I say to you today is a fact that I live and witness every day.

Everything I share with you today goes back to one single reason: The embargo, the sanctions, that have been imposed on us for the past 12 years. If it was not for this embargo, we would not have had to suffer without food, clean water, sanitary conditions. For we have enough natural resources to use and to maintain a normal healthy life. If it was not for the embargo, we could have good school systems, lunches for our children, so they could study and progress in their daily schooling.

To all of you people of conscience, we raise our voice asking for your help to lift the embargo, the sanctions, from us, from the people of Iraq, and apply justice by allowing us to get what is necessary for our daily survival. We, the people of Al-Basrah, ask you in the name of all the sufferers, in the name of our children, who are without milk, in the name of the elderly and the sick, who await their medicine. We, the innocent people, ask you and beg you to urge your government officials to lift the embargo imposed on us.

My brothers and sisters, I have high hopes and faith that you will deliver my message and request to responsible officials. To stand beside us and support the people who are suffering, is nothing more than doing justice.

These difficult circumstances gave our church a great opportunity to do its apostolic duty to serve humanity. We, as members of the church, are doing our best effort to give the "embargo" a different face, and that is: That the "embargo" is not just a penalty imposed by some people on others, but rather, in reality, an opportunity to

sanctify the soul, and to help it to accept and withstand pain and suffering and view them as an opportunity for redemption.

Against all existing difficulties, we do our best to lighten the burdens of pain and suffering on our brothers, sisters and children and all our people.

- We have opened, within our parish, a free pharmacy for distributing medicines to the poor patients, who have no money or access to medical supplies. We also provide them with money needed to obtain surgical operations.
- For small children, we have tried our best to allow them to live their childhood within reasonable circumstances. So we opened two kindergartens, provided them with learning supplies and reasonable comfort. We also transport the children back and forth and provide them with free breakfast every day.
- As for the young people, our hope for the future, they are in our mind and conscience all the time. We feel badly for their difficult psychological conditions. Because of that, we have opened an institute for teaching the operation and use of computers. We expect to graduate from this institute about 150 young people, boys and girls. We take care of all expenses, and the training is free for the students. We are also in the process of preparing an athletic field for their free time.
- We also participate in providing free transportation for students to go to their regular schools, colleges and universities.
- As a separate project for younger boys and girls, we provide the families of 112 poor children with monthly monetary support to help their parents provide them with a life suitable for normal childhood.
- In addition, we provide each year about 1000 pairs of shoes to school children and also provide them with school supplies to encourage them to remain in school and continue their education.
- As for the elderly, we visit them and check on their conditions, and help them to live the rest of their lives in comfort and hope. In Basrah there is an "old people's home" operated by the government. We help provide clothes and supplies and prepare to take to them all meals one day each week.
- For a number of poor families that have no income whatsoever, we provide a monthly income and a place to live for those that are homeless.
- In addition to all of these humanitarian and social projects, we have recently been faced with a major construction project. We have to make major repairs to our cathedral where the roof had fallen two years ago. We also built an orphanage for girls and opened workshops for young people to work and provide them with income. And it is our hope to construct a housing project for families with low income and the homeless.

Our reliance is on God and from God we request help.

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+ Archbishop Gabriel Kassab