

On International Seed Day: Stop the Cultural Rape of Mesopotamia

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On the 26th of April 2004, Paul Bremer, the head of the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA), amended 100 orders, which privatized economic, industrial, and agricultural resources and activities in Iraq. This was done to guarantee that the American and international corporations would get their share of these resources. This article will focus on order No. 81, which governs the topic of patents, intellectual property, industrial design, integrated circuits, and plant variety law (1).

In accordance with this order, farmers are obliged to purchase 'Registered Seeds' from conglomerates which have these seeds registered under their name, and which have been genetically altered. Some of these companies include Monsanto, Syngenta, Bayer and Dow Chemicals. Here, it is necessary to point out that these seeds, which are labeled "genetically modified" (GM), are used only once because they result in sterile crop (2). In other words, farmers cannot keep the seeds and reuse them in the next planting season. Farmers and cultivators need to pay these companies every season to use these seeds. Farmers in Mesopotamia have historically been known to save and use seeds from one season to the next. According to FAO, nearly 97% of the farmers and cultivators in Iraq keep and save the seeds to use for the next planting season. Order 81 considers this practice illegal, and companies, which provide seeds, can actually sue farmers and cultivators who do not abide by this law.

In Order 81, these genetically altered seeds are called "protected variety" and the unregistered or local seeds are referred to as "infringing variety". This order was supposedly put in place to protect plant variation, while everyone working within this profession is aware that plant variation only applies to the natural variation. This condition ends the moment the plant is genetically engineered or altered. The only apparent explanation for this specific terminology is to protect the rights and interests of the conglomerates who "create" these seeds.

According to the Geneva Convention, the occupation government does not have the right to change the laws governing the country, which it

occupies (3). For this reason, Order 81 is considered invalid. Also implementing this order is a clear violation of the UN declaration of the rights of indigenous people, Article 31, adapted by UN General September 2007. This declaration states that indigenous societies have the right to protect their culture and heritage, including their eating habits, agriculture, etc. (4)

The agricultural practices in Iraq were previously governed by the constitution of 1970 and its related amendments, which does not allow the monopoly of biological resources in Iraq, and which allows farmers to exchange experience, resources, seeds, and knowledge related to this practice (5).

Problems currently faced by the agricultural sector in Iraq:

One of the most important problems the Iraqi agricultural sector is currently suffering from is the increase of soil salinity, which is a direct result of poor agricultural practices. Over three decades, the previous government attempted the reclamation of wide areas of land, including laying the foundations for irrigation and drainage systems, such as the Dujaila, Ishaqi, Mussaib Kabeer projects, and also the Khales projects. To protect Tigris and Euphrates water quality, the Third River project was constructed to divert drainage saline water of the agriculture lands to Arabian Gulf. Unfortunately, the actual benefits of these projects were not achieved due to the comprehensive economical sanctions that were imposed on Iraq by USA for more than one decade. Other serious problem facing the agricultural sector in Iraq is the desertification. Land degradation and desertification, and water shortages are major results of Tigris and Euphrates rivers flood plains recession after the construction of GAP projects on the two rivers headwaters in Turkey. Other reasons for the desertification has been the long droughts periods the country suffered from and lack of farmers due to internal displacement within the country as a result of threats and detention of the occupation forces. Further recession in Iraq's agricultural sector is largely due to the fact that farmers are no longer receiving the subsidies from the government the way it use to be before the occupation such as providing them with insecticides, herbicides, seeds, and fertilizer. Farmers were also accustomed to purchasing heavy machinery like tractors at very low prices from the Eskanderia Agriculture Ministry.

The role of the Comprehensive Sanctions in sabotaging the agricultural activities in Iraq:

The economic sanctions that were imposed by the United States of America on Iraq had a huge role on the economical, health, education, and human development in Iraq from 1990 – 2003, and also in crippling its agricultural and industrial activities. It has become painfully obvious that the goal of this embargo was to secure Iraq for occupation later on in 2003.

The agricultural activities in Iraq were affected in the following ways:

1. Destruction of the irrigation infrastructure directly as a result of a lack of supplies, equipment, and spare parts necessary for the sprinkler systems, pumping stations, power stations, etc.
2. A lack of chemical insecticides resulted in the damage of crops and seeds.
3. Farmers were no longer able to procure heavy equipment necessary for agricultural activities such as tractors, which were formerly manufactured for them by Agriculture Ministry.
4. Insufficient chemical fertilizer due to the fact that the factories, which previously produced chemical fertilizers, were damaged through air raids. The government was not allowed to import spare parts or certain chemicals, which were necessary for the production of fertilizer in the Beiji and Khor Zubair fertilizer plants.
5. Areas in southern Iraq were polluted with radioactive materials due to the use of depleted uranium weaponry on areas such as Basra and Nassriya. This problem has resulted in a panic and local boycott of the products from these areas. This pollution also resulted in the death of large numbers of livestock in contaminated areas (5).
6. Continuous bombing of palm groves in southern Iraq, and the use of burning thermal networks to destroy wheat and barley fields in Mosul and the Jazeera for the purpose of crippling the agricultural activities in Iraq and weakening the populace with hunger to prepare for the 2003 occupation.

In March 2003, during the military operations of the occupation of Iraq, a crippling blow was given to the agricultural sector in Iraq in the through the destructing agricultural research centers such as Aba'a Center, and other agricultural facilities. All of these centers' archives and research were either damaged beyond repair or stolen, including one of the best plant encyclopedic collections in the world "Flora of Iraq". Palm groves were also attacked in areas such as Heet, Diyala, Baaquba, and Kholes (6). All this was done in an attempt to prepare the market to be monopolized by corporations

such as Monsanto, Syngenta, Bayer, Dow Chemicals, and more through resolutions such as order 81.

To ensure the failure of the occupation goals of Iraq, we must all work to stop implementing the colonial resolutions (including order 81) that were issued by the American occupation to pilfer Iraq's resources and wealth. The occupation also strives to turn Iraq into a vicious consumer market for its multi-national corporations. We call on all nations who would like to keep their sovereignty, wealth and heritage to stand by us in the preservation of the cultural legacy of Mesopotamia, which has enriched the world for thousands of years with its rich history of modern agriculture.

Notes From:

1. <http://www.trade.gov/static/iraq-memo81.pdf>
2. Andrew Bosworth "Mutant Seeds of Mesopotamia". Oct. 15, 2008
<http://uruknet.info>
3. The soils of war, The real agenda behind agriculture reconstruction in Afghanistan and Iraq.
4. UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People/article 31
<http://www.un.org/esa/socdev/unpfii/en/declaration.html>
5. Al-Azzawi, S. N. "Depleted Uranium Contamination in Iraq: An Overview" <http://www.globalresearch.org> Aug. 8, 2006
6. ماهر عبدالله، بعد ان كان سلة خبز الشرق الاوسط، المواد الزراعية الخليجية تغزو اسواق العراق، مجلة عالم اسيا/ السبت 20 ذي الحجة 1428 الموافق 29/ديسمبر 2007.