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Nonviolence against hypocrisy in the Gulf

Following the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in August 1990, the agenda for the peace movement was set by US President George Bush. That is something to worry about.

The Gulf crisis posed difficult questions for supporters of nonviolent action against aggression. How could nonviolent action have been used to stop Saddam Hussein? After all, he had been massacring his opponents for years.

The main focus in the Western peace movement was to support sanctions and to oppose the invasion of Iraq. The sanctions were not really nonviolent since they were backed by force.

There were some important nonviolent actions against war in the Gulf. Perhaps the most courageous was the Gulf Peace Camp, set up on the border between Iraq and Saudi Arabia by nonviolent activists from a range of countries.

Yet, it must be said, simply opposing the invasion of Iraq provided no answer to the question of how to use nonviolent action to challenge the occupation of Kuwait. Therefore, as well as supporting such nonviolent interventions, it is also important to look more broadly at the Gulf situation and draw lessons for the future development of nonviolent struggle.

Could nonviolent action have been used to stop Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait? Hardly. Living in a vastly unequal and authoritarian society, the people of Kuwait could not have been

expected to provide united nonviolent resistance against an invasion. What then is the role for social defence?

A clue comes from the massive hypocrisies involved in the US-led coalition against Iraq, in which Saddam Hussein was portrayed as the epitome of evil. Numerous governments proclaimed outrage at the invasion and occupation of Kuwait, yet they did nothing about the US invasions of Panama and Grenada. Nor had they taken much action against the Israeli occupation of Gaza and the West Bank. They did not intervene against the Indonesian invasion and occupation of East Timor nor against the invasion and occupation of Western Sahara by Morocco. Governments encouraged the sale of weapons to Iraq, in spite of Saddam Hussein's horrible human rights record. Most blatantly of all, they supported the Iraqi invasion of Iran with arms and intelligence.

These hypocrisies have been pointed out often, but one implication for the peace movement seldom has been noticed. The key point is that the agenda for the peace movement was set by those governments—especially the US government—that suddenly decreed that Saddam Hussein was the greatest danger in the world. Most of the media took their cues from their governments, and popular opinion was thereby shaped.

Although there are some two dozen wars around the world at any given time—such as, at the time of the invasion of Kuwait, those in El Salvador, Ethiopia, Angola, Afghanistan, Cambodia and the Philippines, many with massive loss of life—the US government declared that Iraq's invasion of Kuwait took precedence over all others. (Indeed, most of the other wars were ignored or forgotten by the world's major powers, in spite of their complicity in many of them.) The peace movement response did not challenge this view.

The result was that supporters of nonviolent action put themselves in the situation of having to provide solutions to a crisis created by state and military priorities. The crisis, by its origins and nature, made nonviolent intervention extremely difficult.

In retrospect, the key time to intervene nonviolently against Saddam Hussein was earlier in his rule, in the 1980s. The powerful 1980s peace movement, though, took little notice even of the Iraq-Iran war, preoccupied as it was with nuclear weapons. Another reason for the neglect of the Iraqi regime's excesses was the support given to it by a host of governments of all political persuasions.

This support took the form of diplomatic recognition, exports of weapons and other equipment, and turning a blind eye to brutality.

The agenda in the 1980s for the dominant powers was to tolerate or encourage Saddam Hussein. Most of the peace movement did nothing to challenge this agenda.

There were many things that could have been done in the 1980s to support the nonviolent opposition within Iraq, including publicity, boycotts, rallies, communication networks, peace camps and peace brigades. But aside from the regular efforts of groups such as Amnesty International, little was done in this regard.

The implication of this analysis is that nonviolent activists need to devote much more effort to set the agenda for nonviolent intervention. Rather than putting almost all effort into promoting social defence in one's own country or into intervening elsewhere according to government-dominated agendas, there should be much more energy directed towards developing networks and ongoing campaigns to support nonviolent struggles in other countries according to criteria and priorities set by nonviolent activists.

Part of any challenge to repression and aggression in other countries must involve a challenge to governments, especially their diplomatic support of brutal regimes and their exports of arms and technologies of repression. This challenge can be called nonviolence against hypocrisy.

Initially, such efforts may not do a lot to challenge the dominant agenda. But until promoters of nonviolent struggle do more to set the agenda, they will be continually asked to solve problems at the wrong time and the wrong place. How much better it would be to take the initiative and help to provide solutions to problems that governments prefer to ignore.

The Gulf crisis should not be considered a "hard case" to deal with by nonviolent action. It is actually a much harder case for the proponents of military strength, the arms trade and "pragmatic" power politics.

Instead of so many activists dropping their usual campaigns to protest against war in the Gulf, I like to imagine a peace movement confident enough to say "So what?" and to point out the hypocrisies and reaffirm its own long-term programme of action. Let's look to the day that the movement sets the agenda for governments, not vice versa.