

On Iraq - May 2004

20th May 2004

Speech by Liz O'Donnell on Iraq

DÁIL DEBATE ON IRAQ, 20 MAY 2004, SPEECH BY LIZ O'DONNELL, TD

A Cheann Comhairle:

This is a timely debate. Among the many thousands of lives lost in Iraq in the last year, this week Iraq has suffered the loss of the head of the Governing Council, Abdel-Zahraa Othman, assassinated in Baghdad on Monday morning last. As a man of moderation, he is a loss to all Iraqis who wish to see their country reach its full political and economic potential.

The continuing loss of life brings into sharp focus the huge challenge of stabilizing Iraq as the deadline for the transfer of sovereignty approaches on the 30th of June.

It also shows yet again that the enemies of a new Iraq are determined to disrupt the progress towards freedom and democratisation, whether this is American-led or UN-led. The killing of Mr. Othman and of many others involved in nation building and UN activities demonstrates that extremists are not intent merely on ending American and British involvement in Iraq, but want to see a descent into anarchy and civil war and even perhaps a return to the tyranny in the style of the old regime.

So as we reflect on the flaws in US and UK strategy in Iraq and there are many, we would do well to reflect on the strategic goals of those who are actively destabilising Iraq. For the sake of all Iraqis and the wider region every effort must be made to prevent a descent into anarchy. There is an urgent need for calm and balanced voices in international affairs. These are testing times for Iraq, first and foremost, and for America and Britain and the International community including Ireland as Presidency of the EU.

A Cheann Comhairle, the images of Iraqi prisoners being tortured and humiliated at Abu Ghraib prison, has rightly caused deep offence around the civilized world. Our instinct is to demand responsibility for such violations - military responsibility on the ground as well as political responsibility at the highest level.

Article Three of the Geneva Convention in relation to the treatment of prisoners of war is unequivocal. It prohibits "violence to life, in particular murder of all kinds, mutilation, cruel treatment and torture". Also outlawed is "outrages upon personal dignity, in particular, humiliating and degrading treatment". Those horrific images recently published by the print and electronic media, in relation to Iraqi prisoners if genuine, represent crime scenes. Many of the images circulating in relation to what went on in the prisons suggest coercive and sexually loaded subordination of Iraqi male prisoners, many hooded, bound, and naked. These images are tailor made to cause maximum offence to Muslim sexual sensibilities.

From time immemorial war has brought out the worst in human kind. Dehumanising the enemy has frequently been employed to assist soldiers to take life and to overcome the inbuilt human resistance to doing so. But these images that have so scandalised the world have not happened in the heat of battle. The sadistic and pornographic elements are plain

for all to see and raise very serious issues about the training and psychological assessment of military personnel who are given control of prisoners in times of war. Clearly, standards have been allowed to fall below levels acceptable to civilised values. So, how is it that a country the United States, which claims to be a leader in democratic values and honour for the rule of law, can find itself so shamed? Could it be that in the so-called war against terrorism anything goes?

I think the answer lies not in the criminal perversion and human frailty of young reservists who were actors in these images but rather a quite dramatic slippage of morality at the command levels in the United States administration. Many people friends of the American people, like Ireland have been frankly appalled at these developments. 9/11 was indeed a defining moment in modern times.

Such a savage and seemingly unprovoked attack on peaceful citizens in New York and Washington by terrorists and the visible and appalling loss of life has brought around profound changes in the American psyche. In times to come, this will be the subject of massive research and analysis. Right now, we all are living through the outturn of what has recently happened to the American political and military mind. Fear, incredulity and vengeance has taken hold and leadership has been very wanting from the world of politics and indeed the judiciary in the United States. The most complicated issues have been simplified and dumbed down. Everyone who is not with America is against America.

People have been asking questions about the manner in which Iraqi prisoners in Guantanamo Bay were being hooded, shackled and abused outside the jurisdiction of the US and the remit of international law. It is now suggested that the Pentagon may have authorised this non-compliance with International law to extend into Iraq for purposes of interrogation - Guantanamo Bay set the tone and it was base. The fact that the US has not signed up for the International Criminal Court speaks volumes.

Confidence in the US Military will not be restored solely by courts martial of relatively low-ranking reservists. The credibility of the United States is now on trial. If knowledge and complicity is proven as between the Pentagon and this abuse and if democratic accountability is to mean anything, there must be resignation at the highest level in the Bush administration.

While the current situation is grave, it is also important not to lose sight of the larger picture in Iraq. The fate of 23 million brutalized and traumatized people is in the balance. We are on *their* side. This requires a fair-minded and sober approach that avoids extreme positions and unrealistic demands. Some have reacted to the prisoner-abuse scandal by calling for an immediate withdrawal of coalition troops from Iraq. In my view, this would be irresponsible at this time. If such a premature withdrawal were to happen it would undoubtedly result in a complete fracturing of Iraqi society - an abandonment of the civilian population. It would also trigger an unprecedented humanitarian crisis. And the American, British and other forces have obligations to Iraq that will not be met by withdrawal.

Neither will they be met by the killing of civilians and oppressive military operations against the civilian population as we saw yesterday. Confidence amongst Iraqis in International assistance can only be built by co-operation and not domination.

As the current holder of the EU presidency, Ireland is uniquely poised to ensure that every effort is made in this regard. For the sake of the Iraqi people, we need to find a consensus through the United Nations that is not compromised by purely strategic considerations but driven by political realities and humanitarian considerations.

All sides must now realize that a peaceful and prosperous Iraq is in everyone's best interest. Without it the security of the Middle East and the wider world cannot be guaranteed. Israel, backed by the US is breaking International law with impunity. Standards are at an all time low in the Middle East. The current offensive in Gaza is a disgrace.

That is why after June 30th there needs to be a clear indication that the 'Occupation' in Iraq has given way to 'facilitation' and nation building. That is why we should criticise America if it is found to have committed war crimes. Without such visible signs of a real transfer of sovereignty, and some voice of sanction about wrongdoing by the occupying forces the Iraqi government will have little chance of earning the respect of all its citizens and of defeating extremist forces.

Conflict between the European Union and the United States only encourages and emboldens the common enemy of all liberal democracies. No country - neutral or allied - can afford to take lightly the threat posed to global security by terrorists or unstable states. In a global age we are all equally at risk. This has been dramatically highlighted by the current threat by al-Qaeda facing the United Nations special representative to Iraq, Lakhdar Brahimi. The people who oppose Mr. Brahimi do not make distinctions between America and Britain, on the one side, and France, Germany, and Russia on the other. When they murder and threaten senior UN personnel they show contempt for the entire community of democratic nations. That is why it is now crucial for the United Nations to speak with one voice and common cause in relation to Iraq.

There must be unanimous support for the new UN resolution that Mr. Brahimi is endeavouring to consolidate. That will send the clearest possible signal that the international community intends to deliver Iraq into an era of peace and prosperity. Through our Presidency we have sought to establish a common position that recognizes the benefits to all sides of giving Iraq every opportunity to succeed. To this end, the European Union must use its influence in the region to help persuade Iraq's neighbours that it is also in their best interest to help solidify the country.

Despite all the tragic scenes witnessed in recent months, the overwhelming majority of ordinary Iraqi citizens are still hopeful that things will eventually come right for them. In a recent nationwide poll conducted by Oxford Research International and the BBC, 56 percent of Iraqis said their lives were much or somewhat better than a year ago, while only 19 percent said they were much or somewhat worse. Looking at the scenes on our TV's it is difficult to comprehend these findings. Yet 71 percent say that they expect that their lives to be even better in a year's time. The last decade has vividly shown how difficult it can be to mend broken societies. Cambodia, Bosnia, East Timor, Haiti, and Kosovo are stark examples of how tough the task can be. After decades of war, tyranny, sanctions, and oppression, Iraq poses an even greater challenge.

There is much healing to be done in the US as well. Where is the political track of dialogue between the civilisations of Islam and the liberal democracies of the West? That clash of cultures holds great danger for all of us. It will not be solved by security, oppression or weapons. The quarrel in the Arab street is vexed and hot. It is no less genuine or vengeful than the bewildered pain in the American heart since 9/11. If the US wants allies in the war against terrorism the US must start being an exemplary global citizen itself. This requires multidimensional foreign policy not a defence policy based on aggression and disregard for international law.