
Interview: Thomas J. Gumbleton



The United States could end the blockade of Iraq today

Thomas J. Gumbleton is the Roman Catholic Auxiliary Bishop of Detroit, Michigan. He discussed his ten-day fact-finding mission to Iraq in an interview with Nina Ogden on Oct. 13.

EIR: You recently travelled to Iraq with the seventh “Voices in the Wilderness” delegation.

Bishop Gumbleton: Yes, we left the U.S. on Sept. 1, arrived in Amman, Jordan on Sept. 2, and in Iraq on Sept. 3, and returned on Sept. 12. We saw the effects of the UN blockade, which are very, very harsh. The result of the blockade has been to cut down on food supplies dramatically, and medical supplies even more dramatically. And, of course, with the blockade in place, it’s been impossible for the country to rebuild itself: So, even if the food and medicine were getting in—which they are not—people would continue to become ill, unnecessarily, because of being unable to get good drinking water. Remember that the blockade has been in since before the war even started. So, by the time the war was over, their infrastructure was totally destroyed, and they did not have the resources to hardly begin to do anything.

EIR: In 1991, the Schiller Institute’s Committee to Save the Iraqi Children sent a fact-finding delegation to Iraq. The destruction to life and health was devastating then, and the delegation called for an end to the blockade. Imagine, six years later—

Bishop Gumbleton: You see children dying, especially. In the short time between delegations, just a couple of months, kids you had visited are now dead, when you go back the next time. And not only kids, but adults, too. That’s because there is not the medicine to treat illnesses that are treatable.

EIR: There was supposed to be a slight relaxation of the embargo to allow Iraq to sell a small amount of oil.

Bishop Gumbleton: That’s UN Resolution 986, which was passed by the United Nations in April 1996. It allows for Iraq to sell \$2 billion worth of oil every six months. However, that has done next to no good. Some food has gotten in because of it, but you have to understand that Iraq only receives 53% of the money that is earned with the sale of this oil. They have

to give the first 30% for the rebuilding of Kuwait. Iraq has been assessed \$60 billion of reparations. To me, that’s incredible. Kuwait was not damaged to that extent by the war, and if Kuwait needs \$60 billion, then Iraq needs hundreds of billions of dollars. But at any rate, they get only 53% of what they sell.

And we also discovered, because we were investigating what we were told by the doctors, that they weren’t getting medical or surgical supplies. So, we went to the UN to find what’s holding it up; it’s been a year and a half since that embargo was supposedly lightened, since the restrictions were lessened. And the UN tells us that the procedures are so complex that it’s impossible to get contracts approved—and all the food or any medicine that they buy has to be done by contract with importers, and they can’t get them approved.

In the time that we were there, there were fifty-something contracts that were turned down, and in this case it was the U.S. that was turning them down. There’s what they call the “661 Committee,” a UN committee based on Resolution 661, which is the one that imposed the embargo. That committee is made up of representatives of the 15 governments on the Security Council, and it has to approve every single contract for the purchase of any food or medicine, according to the UN. And so, it takes a terrible amount of time to approve all these contracts, and many of them don’t get approved for one reason or another; and the United States, at any time, has a veto.

EIR: What you brought up, about this embargo being in place since the war, is important to remember.

Bishop Gumbleton: It started four days after the war. It was Aug. 6, 1990, when the embargo went into place. The war started on Aug. 2. It’s been [in effect] since that time. Now let me say, when I say the war, I mean the invasion of Kuwait. The U.S.—I mean, the UN, did not go to war against Iraq until January 1991. So, the embargo has been in place since six months before that.

EIR: I thought we should review for our readers what did happen at that time, because of all the propaganda, all the demonizing of Saddam Hussein. People may not remember what was going on at that time—how the strategy was an oil-

We have to end that blockade. It's unjust. It's war against the population, against the people of Iraq; and there's no way that could ever be morally justified—even if you believe in war. The war against the population is immoral, and that's what's going on.

shock war, and how much that has affected, not only Iraq, but also many developing nations, given the manipulation of the price of oil.

Bishop Gumbleton: I also think the U.S. government, at that time, wanted to provoke the war so it could deploy troops on a permanent basis in the Middle East. We hadn't had that before. We had what we called a rapid deployment force, where we could transport troops and military [equipment].

EIR: But this brought about the out-of-area deployments.

Bishop Gumbleton: Right. We didn't have any place in Saudi Arabia where we could keep troops on a permanent basis. But with the war, Saudi Arabia was persuaded to allow us to establish bases there, and airfields and so on. And so now, we have military presence where we did not have it before. And, we couldn't get that without the threat of a war.

Before the war started, Iraq and Kuwait were in dispute over oil problems. For several years previous to that time, Kuwait was overproducing, and that was lowering the price of oil. That was hurting the Iraqi economy tremendously. Kuwait was doing what they call slant drilling, and actually extracting oil from Iraqi fields. Saddam Hussein was trying to stop this through negotiations, and Kuwait refused to negotiate. They were at a stalemate; and that's when, in July 1990, in the visit of April Glaspie, our ambassador, with President Hussein, he brought up this problem and indicated that he was getting nowhere, and that it might lead to war. And that's when she said that the U.S. has no position on Arab-Arab border disputes. That was like saying, "If you have to go to war, just go to war."

EIR: Here's the exact quote; I saw it this morning as I was preparing for our discussion: "We have no opinion on Arab-Arab conflicts like your border dispute with Kuwait."

Bishop Gumbleton: That's right. And she denied it at the time, or rather in March of the following year, when she was testifying. But then, the exact memo was published. She did say it. And so it was clearly a provocation, sort of like a green light.

EIR: She also said, "Not only do I want to say that President Bush wants better relations with Iraq, but that he also wants an Iraqi contribution to peace and prosperity in the Middle

East. President Bush is an intelligent man and he is not going to declare an economic war against Iraq."

Bishop Gumbleton: Oh, right.

EIR: I was just reminded that in the course of organizing for our conference to stop the genocide in the Great Lakes region of Africa, a few months ago, we called the State Department and asked to speak to the person heading up the East Africa desk. It was April Glaspie!

Bishop Gumbleton: Oh, no!

EIR: We reached the East Africa desk, and April Glaspie called us back as the head of that department. April Glaspie—we were more worried about the threat of war in Africa than ever.

Bishop Gumbleton: Oh, God!

EIR: Remember: First we saw George Bush's madness in Panama, and then the madness of Desert Storm. Thatcher was trying to stop the potential for development after the fall of the Berlin Wall—the kind of "prosper thy neighbor" policy discussed by Malaysia's Prime Minister Mahathir bin Mohamad, in his speech at the IMF meeting in Hongkong. Iraqi officials met recently with Malaysian and Indonesian officials to discuss plans for development. Also, China and Iraq have finalized oil contracts. This is very important, when put in the context of building a New Silk Road. What other reason for the continuing torture of the people of Iraq can there be, but the geopolitical manipulations which would stop real development in the region?

Bishop Gumbleton: Absolutely. That's very clear. To me it is, anyway. People are used, like Bush used the "Contras." In Africa, one side is armed against the other side. People suffer, as a result of this, in devastating ways. I find that very evil.

EIR: What plans to you have for alleviating the situation in Iraq?

Bishop Gumbleton: Voices in the Wilderness will continue to try to raise money to get medicine and food over there. We'll keep doing the best we can. Although the money we can raise doesn't make a lot of difference, it does at least show support for the people there, and they're very grateful for it.

But then, we're trying to take every step we can, to make the public more aware of what's going on, which is a way of ending the blockade—that is the ultimate goal. We have to end that blockade. It's unjust. It's war against the population, against the people of Iraq; and there's no way that could ever be morally justified—even if you believe in war. The war against the population is immoral, and that's what's going on. So, we're trying to stop this war.

EIR: I understand that you are presenting a resolution to the Bishops Conference meeting in November.

Bishop Gumbleton: Well, I'm hoping to. I've asked them to consider it. Now, whether they'll put it on the agenda or not, I don't know. It emphasizes that the Catholic Bishops, speaking as moral teachers of the Catholic Church, would ask for an end to the blockade, based on our moral teaching: that it is totally unjustified—and could never be justified. There are times, within what is called “just war theory,” when you can use war in order to try to bring peace. I believe the only way you can try to overcome injustice is through nonviolent efforts; but, within the Catholic theology of just war, there are definitely limits on how you may wage that war.

One of those limits is, that it can never be counter-population warfare, and to me this is clearly counter-population warfare. When the UN reports that over 4,500 children are dying every month, that's war against the people! And over a million people have died since the military struggle has ended—and again: That is counter-population warfare.

You may remember that Pope John Paul II spoke out quite strongly to try to stop the war from occurring. He pleaded for negotiations to get at the root problems. But that's never been done.

EIR: When you were in Iraq, what kind of institutions did you visit?

Bishop Gumbleton: Mainly hospitals. We went to Catholic hospitals, and also state-run hospitals. We visited churches. We also visited the orphanage of the Missionaries of Charity, Mother Teresa's sisters. We went there and saw the work they're doing with the kids that have been abandoned—many with very serious physical defects: without arms or legs and so on, deformed physically. We talked with as many of the people in the streets and the neighborhoods that we could, and visited the shelter that had been bombed during the war; we saw the effects of that bombing. I spoke to a number of the Catholic Church leaders there.

I think it's important to point out to people that Christian churches *are allowed* to function very publicly in Iraq, contrary to what happens in some other Middle Eastern countries. In Iraq, the Christian churches and Catholic churches are opened and functioning in a very public way. I met with many Catholic leaders, and discussed with them the situation, and all of them expressed the same plea: to end the embargo, to stop this blockade. They can't recover as a people without

being able to have international commerce again. And so, they are pleading to end this. And that was the plea from everyone. The doctors in the hospitals were just outraged that they had to do surgery without anesthesia. It's very distressing to see people so hindered who are trying to do good work.

EIR: The people must have admirable morale to keep functioning under these circumstances.

Bishop Gumbleton: That's right. It takes a lot of courage. But they're suffering terribly, and becoming poorer and poorer. Parents will sell anything they have, even their houses, in order to try to get medicine for their children. But, they buy the medicine that has been left over from before, or perhaps has been smuggled in through some kind of black market—but then the doctors say, “We have no idea whether this medicine has been stored properly, whether it's going to work or not. It may be useless.” And yet, the people pay everything they have to purchase medicine, not even knowing if it's any good.

EIR: And this is a country that is not monarchical, and that stresses education for its people. Especially compared to Kuwait.

Bishop Gumbleton: Correct. It was simply much more open, as far as, for example, rights of women, and women being able to enter into professions and become—well, like the head of the oncology department at one of the hospitals we visited was a woman doctor. There, it's very ordinary for women to be in all the professions; and again, there's freedom for churches to function, and that's not typical for other countries in the Middle East. So, it's certainly much more of an open society, in that sense. And the educational system was rather good throughout the country, as well as public health.

Kuwait, by comparison, was alright for the Kuwaitis. But, for the majority of people who live in that country, who are not allowed to become citizens, the situation was very, very poor: They have no rights whatsoever. They could be deported at any moment, and many of them were, as soon as the war started.

EIR: What would you like our readers to do?

Bishop Gumbleton: I would like them to become angry about the situation. I would like them to express their outrage to President Clinton, to Secretary [of State Madeleine] Albright, and to their Representatives in the House and the Senate. If the United States said it was willing to back away from the blockade, the UN Security Council, I'm sure, would remove it.

EIR: It looked like there would be progress last year in that direction.

Bishop Gumbleton: The United Kingdom and the U.S. uphold the blockade, so we have to get to our government. We could end it today, if our government decided to.