

Statement to the Security Council by the Secretary-General on the closure of the Oil-for-Food Programme – 20 November 2003

Mr. President,

The Council meets today to mark the completion of one of the largest, most complex and most unusual tasks it has ever entrusted to the Secretariat – the only humanitarian programme ever to have been funded entirely from resources belonging to the nation it was designed to help. The mandate you gave us – to assume temporary custody of Iraq's oil exports and apply the revenue to a humanitarian programme – is unprecedented in the history of the United Nations.

It was a task that arose from the sanctions imposed on Iraq, also by this Council, after the invasion and occupation of Kuwait in August 1990. At that time, few of us, and I repeat, few of us, could have imagined that those sanctions would remain in place for nearly thirteen years, or the terrible toll they would impose on the health and nutrition of millions of innocent people, particularly the most vulnerable.

As early as 1991, with growing concern over the humanitarian situation in the country, the United Nations proposed measures to enable Iraq to sell limited quantities of oil to meet its people's needs. The Government of Iraq declined these offers, contained in particular, in Security Council resolutions 706 and 712.

By 1995, with the door to exports and imports closed, Iraq's essential services, from electricity to hospital care and education, had been severely degraded. And yet there was still no sign that Iraq would soon comply fully with the conditions that the Council had imposed for the lifting of sanctions.

In April 1995, rightly considering that innocent Iraqis should as far as possible be spared the consequences of their government's refusal to comply, the Council adopted resolution 986, establishing the Oil-for-Food Programme. But it was not until May 1996 that the Government of Iraq agreed to sign a memorandum of understanding. The first Iraqi oil export under the Oil-for-Food Programme was in December 1996 and the first shipments of food arrived in March 1997.

Under the programme, the Secretary-General was required to supervise the sale of Iraqi oil, and to monitor the spending of the proceeds on specific goods and services for the benefit of the Iraqi people.

In nearly seven years of operation, the Oil-for-Food Programme has been required to meet an almost impossible series of challenges, using some 46 billion dollars of Iraqi export earnings on behalf of the Iraqi people. Under it, nine different United Nations agencies, programmes and funds developed and managed humanitarian operations in Iraq, meeting the needs of the civilian population across some 24 economic and social sectors.

During these seven years, the Programme delivered food rations sufficient to feed all 27 million Iraqi residents. As a result, the malnutrition rate among Iraqi children was reduced by fifty per cent.

National vaccination campaigns reduced child mortality from preventable diseases. As of today, there have been no reported cases of polio in Iraq for almost three years.

Electricity blackouts in Baghdad were reduced under peak summer loads.

Clean water became more available for personal use.

And the Programme enabled the overcrowded schools throughout the country to operate in two shifts instead of three.

Let me stress that the bulk of all the work performed by the Oil-for-Food Programme in Iraq has been carried out by Iraqi nationals working for the United Nations. I wish to express my gratitude and admiration for the competence, loyalty and devotion of the national staff, many of whom have incurred considerable risks in carrying out the Programme. Indeed, a significant number have lost their lives, and I pay special tribute to them.

Let me also pay tribute to the international staff who have worked on the Programme, and particularly to its Executive Director, Benon Sevan. He has served the Organization in this, as in many previous capacities, far beyond the call of duty.

At midnight tomorrow, in accordance with your Resolutions, we are handing over all these responsibilities, together with the remaining funds and assets – assets ranging from schools to electrical power stations and some \$8.2 billion worth of food, medicines and other essential supplies – to the Coalition Provisional Authority.

The actual delivery of these items will continue well into next year. Any unspent or undispersed amounts will be transferred to the Development Fund for Iraq after the Programme closes.

I am glad to say that the CPA is making arrangements to transfer most of the 2,500 Iraqis who have been working for the United Nations in the three northern governorates to posts in the local government. I hope their colleagues serving in the centre and the south of Iraq, of whom there are over eight hundred, will receive similar consideration.

We take pride in the fact that we have achieved an orderly handover of such a large and expensive programme, on time and in spite of the current insecurity in Iraq and the disruptive bomb attack on our headquarters. Especially since the cruel loss of life and injuries, not just to our international staff, but to our local staff on 19 August, all of us at the United Nations now feel intimately connected to the trauma that Iraqis are living through day by day. We are closing the Oil-for-Food Programme, but we remain determined to continue helping Iraq's long-suffering people in whatever ways are still open to us and we are determined to implement the other mandates you have given to us.

Thank you very much, Mr. President.