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LESSONS FROM A WAR ZONE

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With much international fanfare, the British auxiliary ship the Sir Galahad has finally docked in Iraq's southern city of Umm Qasr. Unfortunately it may be many days before the so called "military planners" actually decide where this cargo of humanitarian aid should go. Worse still there is every chance that distribution of the 200 tonnes will be met with similar scenes to those recently observed just yards from the Kuwait border. Namely, military guards and camera crews looking on helpless as the aid distribution descends into a free for all.

It is these pictures of people literally clawing their way into the back of trucks which are perhaps some of the most tragic and evocative to have emerged from Iraq in recent days. Rather more pathetic was the so called coverage from some of the major news channels which had anchor men and women querying why such skirmishes were taking place.

Aid of any kind has the potential to be deeply divisive. Even the most well intentioned and most carefully organized efforts to address need can descend into anarchy. This is not something that happens "somewhere else". It is occurring right here and right now in our own backyard.

You only have to get underneath the skin of Britain's own experience in urban regeneration to see communities torn apart by the arrival of the very resources they have worked so hard to achieve. Ok, there is no lorry, no sacks of food and no bottled water but I could take you to a "Community Forum" or two where distribution of funds, computer equipment, and training is equally haphazard. Even more depressing is the almost universal sign up to 'competition for assistance' which sees the most able jostling their way to the very front of the queue when the regeneration bandwagon finally roles up in town.

The comparisons do not end here. While we have heard much in the media of Sir Galahad and its cargo, the coverage given to the World Food Programme which has



been getting on with distributing 500,000 tonnes of food a month in Iraq has been minimal. Now why do I keep getting flashbacks to those Government announcements around New Deal or SRB or even City Challenge?

OK, I can hear people now launching into that age old argument of “some aid is better than nothing at all”. That is undoubtedly so. But as Oxfam’s spokesman Alex Renton said recently, “*years of experience has shown us that the picture of the soldier with a gun in one hand and a loaf of bread in another is not a happy one*”. Draw your own parallels.