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 U.S. digs, searches in vain for Iraqi chemical weapons

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By Adrian Croft

NASSIRIYA, Iraq, April 17 (Reuters) - A U.S. military excavator shovels another load of mud on to a canal bank near the southern Iraqi city of Nassiriya, cutting a deep trench.

The mechanical digger strikes a slab of concrete, raising hopes this could be a hidden dump of Saddam Hussein's weapons of mass destruction -- a nuclear, biological or chemical "smoking gun" to help justify the U.S.-led war to oust the Iraqi leader.

Nothing is found.

After days of intense digging and searching at least seven suspicious sites near Nassiriya, U.S. experts have found chemical warfare protective suits, but no chemical weapons.

Chief Warrant Officer Alex Robinson, leading the U.S. search in the area, admitted on Thursday that his list of suspect sites in southern Iraq was "kind of drying up".

"I guess the main focus of effort is around Baghdad and maybe a little bit to the north and the west where they think a lot of the WMD (weapons of mass destruction) have been secreted or the labs are located underground," he told Reuters.

Robinson said his team's various inspections had found an antidote to nerve gas, but had otherwise turned up "regular laboratory chemicals that you'd find in a high school lab."

A trailer at the back of a military hospital, suspected of being a mobile chemical weapons laboratory, turned out to be a cooking trailer, while a laboratory the U.S. team visited was for research into concrete and asphalt work, he said.

"Those are the kind of tip-offs we get. We don't want to discount anything. The one you don't go to look at will be the one that has whatever it is you want to find," said Robinson, who comes from Carlsbad, California.

Many of the tips come from local residents, convinced that mustard

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gas or other lethal weapons were being produced at the sites, he said.

Washington's conviction that, despite his denials, Saddam retained weapons of mass destruction -- from lethal gases to deadly nerve agents -- and was ready to use them was the main justification for the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq.

"We went to look at four missiles lying on the ground the other day (and) a house that had a bunch of canisters that were like little chemical containers strewn throughout and a whole bunch of NBC (nuclear, biological and chemical) gear," he said.

No chemical weapons were found at either site.

The canisters turned out to be for chlorine, which could be a component of toxic gas but in this case was probably used to purify water, Robinson said.

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