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CIA 'sabotaged inspections and hid weapons details'

By Andrew Buncombe in Washington

14 February 2003

Senior democrats have accused the CIA of sabotaging weapons inspections in Iraq by refusing to co-operate fully with the UN and withholding crucial information about Saddam Hussein's arsenal.

Led by Senator Carl Levin, the Democrats accused the CIA of making an assessment that the inspections were unlikely to be a success and then ensuring they would not be. They have accused the CIA director of lying about what information on the suspected location of weapons of mass destruction had been passed on.

The row is of heightened significance given the Bush administration's preparations to argue later today before the UN Security Council that the inspections have run their course and it is now time to move to military action.

France, Russia, Germany and other members of the Security Council are likely to back a counter-proposal to increase the number of inspectors, providing them, if necessary, with the support of armed UN soldiers, as a means of avoiding a military strike.

The accusation of US sabotage emerged from a series of Senate hearings on Capitol Hill. On Tuesday, George Tenet, the CIA director, told the armed services committee panel that the agency had provided the UN inspectors with all the information it had on "high" and "moderate" interest locations inside Iraq – those sites where there was a possibility of finding banned weapons. But Mr Tenet later told a different panel that he had been mistaken and that there were in fact "a handful" of locations the UN inspectors may not have known about.

Senator Levin, from Michigan, responded by saying the CIA director had not been telling the truth. Citing a number of classified letters he had obtained from the agency, he said it was clear the CIA had not shared information with the

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inspectors about a "large number of sites of significant value".

He said the CIA had told him additional information would be passed to the inspectors within the next few days.

Mr Levin pushed Mr Tenet on whether he thought the inspections had any value. The CIA director replied: "Unless [President Saddam] provides the data to build on, provides the access, provides the unfettered access that he's supposed to, provides us with surveillance capability, there is little chance you're going to find weapons of mass destruction under the rubric he's created inside the country ... The inspectors have been put in a very difficult position by his behaviour.

Mr Levin said later he believed the CIA had, in effect, taken the decision to undermine the inspections. "When they've taken the position that inspections are useless, they are bound to fail," he told The Washington Post. "We have undermined the inspectors."

Mr Levin has raised his concerns with the White House. In a letter to President Bush, the senator asked that America provide the inspectors with as much information as available.

He wrote: "The American people want the inspections to proceed, want the United States to share the information we have with the UN inspectors and want us to obtain United Nations support before military action is used against Iraq."

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