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Spy report saw no proof of Iraq arms

'02 assessment fuels doubt on prewar claims

By Bryan Bender, Globe Correspondent, 6/7/2003

WASHINGTON -- The Defense Intelligence Agency, the Pentagon's main spy unit, stated in a report last fall that there was "no definitive, reliable information" that Iraq was producing or stockpiling chemical or biological weapons, casting the most serious doubts yet on the Bush administration's prewar contentions that Saddam Hussein was operating a widespread gas and germ warfare program.

The secret document nonetheless expressed confidence that the regime was concealing unconventional weapons, basing that conclusion on unspecified pieces of intelligence that indicated Iraq was hiding activities from United Nations weapons inspectors scouring the country at the time.

But the findings in the September 2002 report, made public yesterday, indicate that a key piece of the US intelligence community had no hard information at that time supporting the White House contention that Iraq posed an imminent and intolerable threat with weapons of mass destruction.

The disclosures place even more pressure on the Bush administration to substantiate its justification for the preemptive invasion launched in March, and raised questions about the ability of US intelligence agencies to track illicit weapons activities successfully.

Two months after Hussein's regime was ousted, no weapons of mass destruction have been found. The items closest to being evidence of the existence of such weapons in Iraq are two trailers turned over to the US military that the Pentagon believes were designed to manufacture biological toxins. Defense officials reached that conclusion after eliminating other possible purposes, but have no concrete proof.

Stephen Cambone, undersecretary of defense for intelligence, said yesterday that a beefed-up military search team called the Iraq Survey Group will arrive in Iraq on Monday to begin a more thorough search for the elusive weapons program, which the White House says it remains confident will be found. The team of 1,400 analysts, interpreters, and document specialists "will now begin a very rigorous, analytically driven effort to identify the Iraqi WMD program," Cambone said at a news conference.

Meanwhile, senior intelligence officials downplayed the lengthy document, first reported this week by US News and World Report. They acknowledged that the Defense Intelligence Agency could not find facilities identifiable as having been part of a weapons of mass destruction program, but that did not undercut their belief that one existed in Iraq.

"In September 2002, we could not specifically pin down individual facilities operating as part of the weapons of mass destruction programs, specifically the chemical warfare portion," Vice Admiral Lowell Jacoby, agency director, told reporters yesterday after briefing lawmakers seeking an explanation for the apparent contradictions.

"It is not in any way intended to portray the fact that we had doubts that such a program existed, that such a program was active, or such a program was part of the Iraqi WMD infrastructure."

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He said the Defense Intelligence Agency ultimately signed on to the view that Iraq "had a weapons of mass destruction program in place."

The report discussed what it called "unusual munitions transfer activity," a reference to suspicious moves made under the cover of night, that led analysts to believe that Iraq "probably had [a chemical warfare] agent," and cited undisclosed intelligence that the Iraqi regime "does have [biological warfare] agents stockpiled that could be weaponized in the event of war," according to a US intelligence official who was provided a copy.

"Were there indicators that they could have a program? The answer would be `yes,' " the official said. "But if you asked an intelligence analyst if this is [definitely] happening, he would say there is no evidence."

It was unclear whether the conclusions by the Pentagon spy agency were included in a broader assessment -- the consensus view of all intelligence agencies -- and provided to President Bush in December. A US intelligence official, who asked not to be identified, said the National Intelligence Estimate did include the analysis.

The estimate concluded that Iraq did have weapons of mass destruction, and predicted that Hussein's regime would continue to develop them, according to intelligence officials.

The Central Intelligence Agency and congressional committees have recently launched reviews of that summary of intelligence in response to allegations that its findings were exaggerated.

The defense agency's report, which includes secret satellite photos of various Iraqi facilities, lent new ammunition to critics of the Bush administration who contend that the intelligence information was exaggerated to justify military action.

"Publicly, the administration was picking things to fit its agenda," said David Albright, a former UN nuclear inspector and now president of the Institute for Science and International Security in Washington.

The report, which was riddled with caveats, "also shows that intelligence agencies are not all-knowing and have trouble finding these sites," he said.

A German inspector, who left Iraq in March, said yesterday that the prewar assertions were "all a big bluff." Peter Franck, in an interview with the German weekly Der Spiegel, said Secretary of State Colin L. Powell's presentation to the UN in February -- in which he listed suspected Iraqi weapons-making activities, asserted that mobile labs were moving around the country, and replayed intercepted communications pointing to illicit activities -- was "all a show for the American public."

Bush and Prime Minister Tony Blair of Britain have come under increased scrutiny from their respective legislatures over the veracity of prewar intelligence. However, opinion polls in the United States continue to show strong backing for the president on Iraq and do not reflect widespread concerns that the information was exaggerated.

The US Congress is reviewing the intelligence community's reporting on the subject. In one investigation, the House Intelligence Committee is seeking to determine whether dissenting views were sufficiently aired.

The defense agency's findings last September, however, do not reflect what spy agencies may have learned in the subsequent six months before the war began. "There was a continuing flow of information coming in to us for analysis and assessment during that whole period," Jacoby said yesterday.

"You don't know what happened after," added Albright.

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