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 EU says U.S. delays medical supplies for Iraq
 By David Lawsky and Tom Miles

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BRUSSELS (Reuters) - The European Commission and Belgium blamed the United States on Friday for causing the last-minute cancellation of an airlift of critical hospital supplies for Baghdad.

The plane -- loaded with 19 tons of surgical equipment, vaccines, anaesthetics, oxygen, syringes, operating tables and pre-natal care supplies -- had been set to leave on Friday from Belgium, which opposed the U.S.-led war on Iraq.

Shortly before take-off, the Belgian C-130 transport was held at Melsbroek military airport, with no likelihood of departure before Tuesday, a week after the date originally set.

European Commission humanitarian affairs spokesman Michael Curtis said the delay had been caused by U.S. military authorities asking for a change in the flight plan.

The Commission said there was no problem landing at Baghdad, but a Belgian military spokesman said U.S. landing permission at the city's airport had not been given.

Asked why it would take until next week to get a new flight plan for medical supplies, Curtis said:

"I think that's a question you'll have to ask the American authorities."

A diplomatic source said the plane was to have flown via Turkey, but the United States was concerned it might be shot at when it entered Iraqi airspace. They were talking about possibly routing it over Saudi Arabia.

A number of dignitaries, including Belgian Prime Minister Guy Verhofstadt, had been set to send off the plane at the airport.

The Commission said that Commissioner Poul Nielsen, who is in charge of humanitarian aid, would visit Baghdad on Tuesday and Wednesday, but the supplies were unlikely to be there by then.

The EU has provided other emergency supplies for Iraq, such as

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food and water, by truck.

One diplomatic source said that if the Commission had known there would be such trouble with the plane, it may have considered flying the supplies into Jordan and sending them overland.

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