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U.S. begins to downplay hunt for banned weapons

By Bill Nichols and John Diamond, USA TODAY

WASHINGTON — The recent surrender of a key Iraqi biological weapons scientist gives the Bush administration another potential source of help in finding Iraqi weapons of mass destruction — a key justification for the war that remains to be proven true.

But U.S. officials and arms experts downplay the possibility that Rihab Rashid Taha — better known as "Dr. Germ" — will provide the smoking gun U.S.-led forces in the region have been seeking. U.S. intelligence officials say other former Iraqi leaders taken into custody have continued to deny the existence of banned weapons, perhaps because they fear being prosecuted as war criminals and are angling for a plea bargain.

Instead, administration officials have tried to shift expectations about the weapons hunt. They emphasize that it could take weeks or months to uncover the arsenal that President Bush and senior officials repeatedly said contained enough chemical and biological munitions to kill tens or hundreds of thousands.

"Every person we get our hands on helps, but I think by their own actions and even admissions, the U.S. government is shifting from the hope that they will find treasure troves full of weapons to having to follow a paper trail and work on a jigsaw puzzle," says Jon Wolfsthal, an arms expert at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. "It appears that they no longer expect to find, in the near-term, major caches of weapons, ready to go."

While they insist that proof of Saddam Hussein's arsenal will eventually be found, administration officials have shifted from prewar warnings of a clear and present danger to more cautious statements that suggest Iraq may have deeply buried its weapons, quickly destroyed them before the war began or shipped them off to Syria.

Though officials are clearly concerned about a backlash from voters and U.S. allies, the worry may be unnecessary. Some recent polls suggest that the public won't be particularly bothered if banned weapons are not found. On May 1, a USA TODAY/CNN/Gallup Poll showed 79% believe the war was justified even if no conclusive evidence is found to show Iraq had weapons of mass destruction.

In Congress, however, Democratic lawmakers are demanding answers.

"Though I was convinced of the (weapons of mass destruction) case made prior to the war, I am increasingly concerned about the lack of progress in uncovering the Iraqi weapons," Rep. Jane Harman, D-Calif., ranking Democrat on the House Intelligence Committee, said last Friday. "We need a thorough accounting of what intelligence was available to Congress and war planners before and during the conflict."

A failure to find proof could undermine future efforts by the Bush administration to use intelligence as a basis for its doctrine of military pre-emption against enemy states.

Reflecting that concern, the Pentagon says it will double to roughly 1,300 the number of people involved in the search for Iraqi weapons, whether through actual field inspections, interrogation of regime officials or interpretation of captured documents. Pentagon officials said last week that U.S. forces had searched 110 of 616 suspected weapons sites.

Since U.S. forces and weapons teams gained full access to Iraq in the days after the war began on March 19, there have been a number of suspicious materials found.

- U.S. officials said last week that a trailer found in northern Iraq has the necessary specifications and equipment to be a mobile biological weapons laboratory, but more tests are needed before a final conclusion is reached. A second trailer also is being examined.
- A special U.S. military and intelligence team found potassium cyanide at a camp in northeastern Iraq used by Ansar al-Islam, a group with alleged ties to al-Qaeda. A U.S. intelligence official said that "tens of pounds" of material found at the camp was suitable for terrorist-style attacks. But the material is not regarded as a chemical weapon, and both the group and the camp were beyond Saddam Hussein's direct control.
- A 55-gallon drum found in the Tigris River town of Baiji, north of Baghdad near Saddam's hometown of Tikrit, initially tested positive for the nerve agent cyclosarin. It later turned out to be rocket fuel.

The problem for the administration is that nothing has been found yet to substantiate U.S. claims that were sweeping and precise: Iraq had technology for enriching uranium for nuclear weapons; Iraq had weaponized thousands of liters of anthrax, aflatoxin and botulinum; and some of these weapons could be launched on as little as 45 minutes notice.

Since the end of the fighting, administration officials have offered a variety of theories about why those weapons haven't been found: Iraq hid the weapons deep in bunkers or caves as yet undiscovered; the weapons were exported to Syria or some other country; Saddam ordered them destroyed to avoid discovery by U.N. inspectors or by coalition invaders; captured Iraqi officials are not telling all they know; quick coalition action prevented Iraqi commanders from using the weapons.

Yet critics counter that no specific evidence has been supplied to support any of these theories. For example, if front-line forces had weapons of mass destruction, as the Bush administration alleged, it remains a mystery why they were not seized as U.S. ground forces rapidly overran Iraqi defenders.

Or if the massive weapons caches alleged by U.S. officials were destroyed or exported, how was that not detected by the blanket surveillance over Iraq by U.S. spy satellites and reconnaissance aircraft?

U.S. officials say time will prove them right. Banned weapons "will be found," Secretary of State Colin Powell told the Senate Foreign Relations Committee last month. Referring to his dramatic charges about Iraqi weapons at the U.N. Security Council Feb. 5, in which he laid out the intelligence supporting administration claims about Iraq, Powell insisted, "Everything we had there had backup and double sourcing and triple sourcing."

Contributing: Judy Keen and Barbara Slavin.

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