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Weapons Inspectors: Iraqi Nuke Program Was In Disarray

By George Jahn, Associated Press

VIENNA, Austria -- U.N. inspectors found Iraq's nuclear program in disarray and unlikely to be able to support an active effort to build weapons, the atomic agency chief said in a confidential report obtained Monday by The Associated Press.

International Atomic Energy Agency chief Mohamed ElBaradei reiterated that his experts uncovered no signs of a nuclear weapons program before they withdrew from Iraq just before the war began in March.

The United States and Britain invaded Iraq because they believed Saddam Hussein's regime was developing nuclear arms as well as chemical and biological weapons.

"In the areas of uranium acquisition, concentration and centrifuge enrichment, extensive field investigation and document analysis revealed no evidence that Iraq had resumed such activities," ElBaradei said in the report, made available to the AP by a diplomat.

"No indication of post-1991 weaponization activities was uncovered in Iraq," he said.

The document was to be reviewed this week by the IAEA's 35-nation board of governors, which convened a meeting Monday at the agency's headquarters in Vienna to reassess nuclear security issues in Iran, Iraq, North Korea and elsewhere.

Because the IAEA teams had to pull out before they could complete their inspections, the agency cannot say conclusively that Iraq had no active nuclear weapons program.

But what the inspectors saw in the months preceding their withdrawal suggested the Iraqis were in no position to build a nuclear weapon, ElBaradei said in his update to the board.

"The agency observed a substantial degradation in facilities, financial resources and programs throughout Iraq that might support a nuclear infrastructure," he said. "The former cadre of nuclear experts was being increasingly dispersed and many key figures were reaching retirement or had left the country."

The IAEA is awaiting a U.N. Security Council review that could lead to an eventual return of its inspectors to Iraq. Regardless of the outcome, IAEA inspectors remain authorized under a nuclear safeguards agreement with Iraq "to ensure that ... Iraq has declared all its nuclear material and activities, and that all Iraq nuclear activities are for peaceful purposes," ElBaradei said in a separate statement Monday.

ElBaradei told the Security Council just before the war that his inspectors had no conclusive evidence Iraq had resumed a nuclear weapons program.