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Search in Iraq Finds No Banned Weapons

Tenet Assails Panel Leaders' Criticism of Prewar Data

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After searching for nearly six months, U.S. forces and CIA experts have found no chemical or biological weapons in Iraq and have determined that Iraq's nuclear program was in only "the very most rudimentary" state, the Bush administration's chief investigator formally told Congress yesterday.

Before the war, the administration said Iraq had a well-developed nuclear program that presented a threat to the United States.

Now, "It clearly does not look like a massive, resurgent program, based on what we discovered," former U.N. weapons inspector David Kay, who heads the government's search, said yesterday after briefing House and Senate intelligence committees in a closed session on his interim report. He said he will need six to nine months to conclude his work, and congressional sources said the administration is requesting an additional \$600 million toward the effort to find weapons of mass destruction.

Kay, who heads the CIA's 1,400-person Iraq Survey Group, said the team had "discovered dozens of WMD-related program activities and significant amounts of equipment" that Iraq had hidden. He said he believes "there was an intent . . . to continue production at some point in time." Among the evidence unearthed was a network of laboratories and safe houses, a laboratory complex hidden in a prison and evidence of a program for ballistic and land-attack missiles with ranges prohibited by the United Nations.

After Kay's briefing, Republican and Democratic senators criticized the intelligence community for misreading the facts on the ground, and some said they believed the administration had misled the public about the threat Iraq posed.

"I'm not pleased by what I heard today," said Sen. Pat Roberts (R-Kan.), chairman of the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, who has been supportive of the administration and the CIA. Roberts said he believes some of the raw intelligence did not support the administration's prewar statements about Iraq's weapons of mass destruction and called some of the claims "sloppy."

"There's enough . . . to make me believe our intelligence was badly flawed," Sen. Dianne Feinstein (D-Calif.) said as she exited the three-hour meeting.

In a separate but related matter, CIA Director George J. Tenet this week sent an angry letter to the two top House intelligence committee members to dispute as misguided and ill-informed their criticism of the raw intelligence used to assess the threat from Iraq.

"The suggestion by the committee that we did not challenge long-standing judgments and assessments is simply wrong," Tenet, a former Capitol Hill intelligence panel aide known for his smooth dealings with members of Congress, said in a letter to chairman Porter J. Goss (R-Fla.), of the Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence, and ranking member Jane Harman (D-Calif.).

Tenet was responding to a letter the two had sent him last week, after their panel examined 19 volumes of data underlying the assessment that Iraq posed a threat to the United States. The letter called the information outdated, circumstantial and fragmentary, and it criticized the CIA for not adequately vetting information or challenging some of its long-held assumptions.

Tenet's letter, obtained by The Washington Post, said the committee had not interviewed enough people to legitimately make its claims and that the communication raised serious claims "in ways that makes more difficult a reasoned and serious dialogue."

"In our view, the committee is not yet in a position to evaluate fully the [intelligence] community's work," the letter states. He also disputed the notion that the CIA did not develop enough human informants in Iraq that could provide fresh, credible information about Iraq since 1998, when U.N. inspectors left the country.

The agency, he said, "directed a sustained and intense collection effort to enable us to continue to make the best possible assessments" of Iraq's secretive weapons programs. "To my knowledge, the committee has never sought to understand the results of these collection initiatives before providing us your letter."

Kay's interim report and the exchange between Tenet and the House committee come at a time of heightened tension between the intelligence community, the White House and Congress over the building of the case for invading Iraq and the mounting costs of a violent, open-ended nation-building effort there.

"Did we misread it?" John D. "Jay" Rockefeller IV (D-W.Va.), the ranking Senate intelligence committee member, asked after meeting with Kay. "Or did they [the administration] mislead us, or did they simply get it wrong? Whatever the answer, it's not a good answer."

Sen. Trent Lott (R-Miss.) said of former Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein, "Maybe he was just playing an old card game bluff."

The administration is asking Congress to approve \$600 million to fund the weapons team's further investigation, double the amount the team has been allocated. While the program is classified, Kay suggested that one of the team's objectives will be to inspect and explode 600,000 tons of ordnance yet to be tested for chemical or biological warheads. The funding request, first reported by the New York Times, also came under attack by some senators.

"At some point, we have to ask ourselves whether there's something better to spend our money on," Richard J. Durbin (D-Ill.) said.

Kay said his search was hindered by what appeared to be the destruction and looting of laboratories and archival records areas, including the destruction of selective computer hard drives as late as May. Inspectors found "small piles of ash where individual documents or binders of documents were intentionally destroyed," he said.

The team, Kay said, found evidence of new research on biological weapons agents, one biological organism concealed in a scientist's home that could be used to produce biological weapons, and labs with the capability to "surge the production of [biological] agents" quickly.

Kay described the two mobile labs discovered after the war ended in northern Iraq -- which President Bush once said confirmed that Hussein possessed programs for weapons of mass destruction -- as not

being "ideally suited" for that use. "We have not yet been able to corroborate the existence of a mobile BW [biological weapons] production effort," the report states.

The survey has begun looking at equipment that could be used to resume chemical production, Kay said. He also indicated that there were leads on other purchases and attempted purchases of chemical agents. He said many scientists said, "Iraq did not have a large, ongoing, centrally controlled [chemical] weapons program after 1991." That finding conflicts with a finding in the intelligence community's October 2002 National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) that it was active.

Kay said Hussein wanted to obtain nuclear weapons, according to interviews with Iraqi scientists and government officials, but "to date we have not uncovered evidence that Iraq undertook significant post-1998 steps to actually build nuclear weapons or produce fissile material."

On Oct. 7, 2002, Bush said that "the evidence indicates that Iraq is reconstituting its nuclear weapons program. . . . Facing clear evidence of peril, we cannot wait for the final proof, the smoking gun that could come in the form of a mushroom cloud."

After the briefing, some lawmakers were optimistic that the military-CIA search would prove the administration's case against Hussein.

Goss, who co-authored the letter to Tenet last week, said of Kay's interim report: "I think the news is extremely good." He said that "no one was misled by the intelligence community." Goss said he believed the community had included the proper caveats in the October 2002 estimate but that "they were working with not quite enough intelligence."

He said his views were meant to be constructive, and that "instead of picking at Dr. Kay, we ought to congratulate him."

Researcher Margaret Smith contributed to this report.

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