**1003**

*Article Content*

THREATS AND RESPONSES: IRAQI ARMS; EQUIPMENT MISSING AT IRAQ ARMS SITE

By John F. Burns

Dec. 3, 2002

The new round of United Nations weapons inspections in Iraq appeared to run into its first serious problem today when inspectors said ''a number of pieces of equipment'' found at a top-secret missile development plant in 1998 had disappeared, despite a requirement under United Nations resolutions that they not be moved.

A terse United Nations statement did not specify the nature of the missing equipment. Inspectors made the discovery during a six-hour visit earlier in the day at a missile plant in the Waziriyah district of northern Baghdad.

Iraqi officials told reporters immediately after the inspection that the team had found nothing amiss.

But hours later, the inspectors' statement brought a sudden turn in what, until today, had been a series of tense but largely uneventful inspections.

The statement, brusquely worded, said the missing items had been placed under surveillance by monitoring cameras in 1998 and ''tagged'' with numbered labels signifying that they were not to be moved.

''In 1998, the site contained a number of pieces of equipment tagged by the United Nations Special Commission,'' the statement said, referring to the agency that was responsible for the inspections through most of the 1990's. The commission withdrew in the last days of 1998 before intensive American missile and bomb attacks. Now, the statement said, inspectors for the new United Nations monitoring agency found that none of the tagged items remained.

''It was claimed that some of these had been destroyed by the bombing of the site; some had been transferred to other sites,'' the statement said.

The Waziriyah plant, run by a state-owned company called Al Karama, was described in the statement as ''one of Iraq's principal missile development sites.''

Other missile experts have said that one of its main tasks has been perfecting electronic guidance systems for a short-range, liquid propellant ballistic missile known as the Samoud, one of several missiles thought to have been developed to carry biological, chemical or even nuclear warheads, as well as conventional explosives.

The compound of about a dozen hangarlike concrete buildings with 20-foot- high steel doors was rebuilt after it was largely destroyed in a United States cruise missile attack in December 1998. President Clinton ordered a four-day bombing assault, joined by British planes, after United Nations officials heading inspection teams that had endured years of harassment and intransigence by Iraqi officials ran out of patience with attempts to block their access to nuclear weapons sites and withdrew the inspectors. There were no further inspections until last week.

With Iraqi officials remaining silent on the issue tonight after the statement was issued, it was not clear whether the problem could be quickly resolved by the Iraqis' finding the missing equipment, or whether the day's events were the preliminary to a more threatening showdown. Bush administration officials have said the United States might act on its warnings of military action against Iraq if it commits even a single serious breach of its obligations under the tough new weapons-inspection mandate passed by the Security Council last month.

Iraqi military officers who run the plant were in a feisty mood when reporters were admitted to the plant at midafternoon. They made a showpiece of a mound of tangled concrete and steel from the American missile attack, bulldozed into an area the size of two football fields. ''See that we have rebuilt everything that the evildoers destroyed,'' said Brig. Gen. Muhammad Saleh Muhammad, the plant's director.

But on the issue of the weapons inspections, the 40-year-old Iraqi officer was circumspect. ''It's not a normal thing, psychologically, to impose this indignity,'' he said. ''But we will cooperate with the inspectors because they come here under a resolution of the United Nations. We want to prove to the world the falsehood of all the claims of Bush and Blair, that we have weapons of mass destruction.'' Of the day's inspection, he said, ''They searched everything, our machinery, our computers, our documents, and they found nothing.''

According to Central Intelligence Agency documents, the Samoud missile system that is the plant's main work -- the Arabic term translates roughly as defiance -- is not in itself a banned weapon under United Nations resolutions, since it has a declared range of less than 150 kilometers, or 94 miles. It is a scaled-down version of the Soviet-built Scud, which Iraq used extensively in its war with Iran. Some versions of the Samoud are said to have a range of as much as 590 miles.

But the main concern about the missile is its intensive development, including repeated flight tests since the Waziriyah plant was rebuilt in 1999. Experts see this development as aimed at technological improvements applicable to multistage missiles with a range of as much as 1,875 miles that Iraq is known to have at an early stage of design. C.I.A. experts have concluded that the Samoud still has major problems, including a shaky guidance system.

The developments at the missile plant today, contrasted with the outcome on Thursday, the second day of the inspections, after United Nations experts found a device known as a fermenter missing while they were examining an animal vaccine laboratory south of Baghdad that had been used to develop deadly biological toxins for military use in the 1990's. On that occasion, the Iraqis led them immediately to a veterinary complex north of Baghdad where the missing fermenter was found.

That sequence was broadly typical of the inspections until today.

By concentrating their early inspections on sites discovered by United Nations teams in the 1990's, the new inspection teams in effect gave the Iraqis a chance to adjust to the stringent terms of the new mandate without, as inspection officials thought, much risk that the Iraqis would be caught openly subverting longstanding weapons restrictions. Senior inspection officials said last week that they expected that problems, if any, would emerge only when the inspections moved on to new sites that the Iraqis may think are unknown to the inspectors.

Those inspections are likely to move into high gear only after next Sunday, the deadline for Iraq to declare all of its banned programs. But today, while the missile inspection team was at Waziriyah, a team of nuclear inspectors broke the pattern and went to two plants that have never been searched before. The plants they chose, distilleries producing a local spirit named arak and 75- cents-a-bottle gin, were about as far as imaginable from the normal run of installations on nuclear inspectors' checklists.

The United Nations statement on the inspections at the distilleries said only that the two plants, and a third nearby that underwent a previous United Nations weapons inspection in 1998, ''proved to be dedicated to the production of alcohol.'' This seemed to vindicate bemused officials at the plants.

''They surprised us with their visit today,'' said Albert Moussa Younan, director of the Al-Baraj plant at Khan Bani Saad, about 20 miles northwest of Baghdad. ''They didn't find anything because our company produces only alcoholic drinks.''

The inspectors arrived in vehicles carrying placards of the International Atomic Energy Agency, responsible solely for searching for banned nuclear programs.

Nuclear experts reached by telephone in the United States and Britain said they knew of no connection between brewing alcohol and the processes required to build nuclear weapons. That seemed to leave two possibilities. One was that the team included biological weapons specialists and that labeling them as nuclear experts might have been a ruse to fool the Iraqis into thinking that the day's target was a nuclear site, when the real concern was to see whether fermenting equipment at the distilleries might have been used to develop biological toxins.

Since the team leader was Jacques Baute, the French nuclear physicist who heads the atomic energy agency's team, a more probable explanation was that the inspectors suspected that equipment used in developing nuclear weapons might have been hidden at the plants.