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THREATS AND RESPONSES: REPORT BY IRAQ; IRAQ ARMS REPORT HAS BIG OMISSIONS, U.S. OFFICIALS SAY

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American intelligence agencies have reached a preliminary conclusion that Iraq's 12,000-page declaration of its weapons programs fails to account for chemical and biological agents missing when inspectors left Iraq four years ago, American officials and United Nations diplomats said today.

In addition, Iraq's declaration on its nuclear program, they say, leaves open a host of questions. Among them is why Iraq was seeking to buy uranium in Africa in recent years, as well as high-technology materials that the United States and Britain have said were destined for a program to enrich uranium. The nuclear document is under review both in Washington and at the International Atomic Energy Agency in Vienna.

The omissions themselves pose a new challenge for the Bush administration: it needs to decide whether to declare that Iraq has failed to meet one of the most important requirements set by the United Nations and to whether to try to use that failure as a justification for American military action.

''What's remarkable is how little new there is,'' said one American official who has access to the Iraqi declaration, ''and how little effort there was to try to explain gaps that everyone knew were there since Unscom left.'' He was using the acronym for the United Nations agency that conducted weapons inspections in Iraq through 1998.

A United Nations diplomat familiar with Iraq's submission said ''our preliminary assessment'' is that much of the declaration ''seems to be recycled.''

''They are claiming they have no new weapons of mass destruction,'' the diplomat said.

A second American official said there were ''omissions big enough drive a tank through,'' citing as examples Iraq's failure to explain what happened to 550 shells filled with mustard gas, and another 150 bombs filled with biological agents, that the United Nations could not account for in the late 1990's.

The Iraqi nuclear declaration includes some revealing details of its nuclear program before 1991. But there are no drawings or descriptions of the gas centrifuges and other equipment for producing highly enriched uranium, senior officials who have reviewed the material said.

Britain said several months ago that Iraq had been buying ''significant quantities'' of uranium from Africa that could only be used in an enrichment program.

It believes that the nuclear program is still active, but several years from producing a weapon -- and probably far behind the efforts of Iran and North Korea.

A top military aide to President Saddam Hussein said Sunday in Baghdad that the program had been abandoned in 1991, when it was close to perfecting a weapon.

Before Iraq submitted the document, the White House press secretary, Ari Fleischer, noted several times that omissions in the declaration would constitute a violation of United Nations Resolution 1441. But now, Mr. Bush and his national security team -- which has often been divided on how much support to give United Nations inspectors and whether to build an international coalition to strike Iraq -- face what officials describe as three major choices.

The first, which has not been seriously considered in the White House, is to demand that Iraq answer specific questions about specific weapons programs. ''We gave them that chance,'' one senior official said today. ''They knew what issues were outstanding in 1998. They blew it.''

The second is to continue with the inspections, and to aid inspectors with intelligence that would guide them to suspect locations. But Mr. Fleischer said earlier this week that the inspectors would receive no information that revealed the sources and methods used to collect them.

The third would be to declare, after a final review of the report, that Iraq is in ''material breach'' of its obligations. But winning that argument in the Security Council, American officials acknowledge, requires ''proving a negative'' -- that is, proving that Iraq has knowledge of weapons materials that it has not accounted for.

Today the United States and Russia recommended to weapons inspectors at the United Nations which material in the Iraqi document should be deleted before the document is shared with the 10 nonpermanent members of the Security Council, Ewen Buchanan, the spokesman for the team, said. All of the 10 are non-nuclear states.

United Nations chemical and biological weapons experts, too, were working to identify material that they would have to filter out of the declaration before it could be distributed more broadly.

But it will be many days -- perhaps several weeks -- before Mr. Bush and his aides offer a fuller, more public assessment of the Iraqi declaration. They have begun work on a point-by-point comparison of the document with their intelligence about Iraqi sites, focusing chiefly on omissions. Within the administration, a debate has broken out over how much intelligence information to declassify to refute Mr. Hussein's contentions.

''The agency is reluctant,'' said one senior official, referring to the C.I.A. ''And some of the more hawkish among us just want to say that the whole thing is laughable, and it is all the legal justification we need.''

Hans Blix and Mohamed ElBaradei, co-chiefs of the inspection teams, are scheduled to give their preliminary impressions of the Iraqi declaration to the Security Council on Thursday.

If the administration can successfully argue that the Iraqis have given no accounting of the chemical and biological stores of which the United Nations inspectors found evidence in the 1990's, they will bolster Mr. Bush's contention that Iraq has violated United Nations mandates and could secretly give some of the weapons to terror groups.

Today senior administration officials said terror networks like Al Qaeda had sought to acquire chemical weapons from a number of sources. But they discounted a report in The Washington Post today that the United States had received credible intelligence that Iraq had recently supplied Qaeda-related terrorists with a deadly chemical nerve agent.

In Vienna, analysts at the International Atomic Energy agency were busy combing through the 2,400 pages of documents that make up Iraq's nuclear declaration, which they received on Sunday.

Officials at the agency said 2,100 of the pages appeared very similar, if not identical, to the last declaration the agency received from Iraq, in 1998. The similarities were so clear that agency analysts were going through pages line for line to determine whether there were any changes at all.

Another 300 pages were in Arabic, and were being translated as fast as the agency could manage. The agency has several nuclear arms experts who are Arabic speakers, and they had already begun to examine the contents of those pages.

Agency officials said the declaration appeared to support Baghdad's insistent statements that it has undertaken no nuclear weapons programs since December 1998, the last time inspectors were in Iraq.

Administration officials, citing intelligence data about equipment and materials Iraq has tried to buy overseas, have accused it of reactivating efforts to build a nuclear weapon.