**1020- ARTICLE**

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THREATS AND RESPONSES: INDICTMENT; Blair Says Iraqis Could Launch Chemical Warheads in Minutes

By Warren Hoge

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Britain asserted today that the Iraqi government of President Saddam Hussein could launch chemical or biological warheads within 45 minutes of an order to use them and acquire a nuclear weapon in one to five years.

The claims were made in a 50-page report intended to bolster the Bush administration's case against the Iraqi leader and released today a few hours before Prime Minister Tony Blair outlined to British lawmakers his case for war if necessary to make Iraq disarm.

Addressing an emergency session of Parliament, Mr. Blair said: ''Our case is simply this. Not that we take military action come what may. But that the case for Iraqi disarmament is overwhelming.'' In a clear allusion to the possible need for the use of force against Iraq, he added: ''Alongside the diplomacy there must be genuine preparedness and planning to take action if diplomacy fails.''

President Bush praised Mr. Blair for demonstrating what he called the Iraqi leader's ''murderous ways.'' Iraq responded with contempt, calling the report a collection of ''exaggeration and lies'' and saying United Nations weapons inspectors would be granted ''unfettered access'' to go wherever they wanted upon their expected return to Iraq in the next several weeks.

During a heated, 11-hour debate in Parliament after Mr. Blair's statement, several lawmakers from the prime minister's Labor Party criticized him sharply. But there was also vigorous and widespread praise for his stand. In general, opposition to the Bush administration's war plans is less strong in Britain than elsewhere in Europe, where it is often virulent.

Once more today, Mr. Blair was cast in the role he took on energetically a year ago, when he rallied support for American's fight against Al Qaeda in Afghanistan. Once again, Britain issued information justifying a potential war against a target chosen by the Bush administration, with the purpose of broadening support and convincing those skeptical of findings attributed to American intelligence sources.

The report contained what it said was intelligence information that Iraq was trying to acquire significant quantities of uranium from unspecified countries in Africa, despite having no civilian nuclear program, and had extended the range of its ballistic missiles as part of a plan to dominate the region.

The chief new elements in the report, experts said, appeared to be the British assessments that Iraq could so quickly launch a chemical or biological warhead and that it had sought to acquire uranium in Africa that could be used to make nuclear weapons.

The view that Iraq is one to five years away from producing a nuclear bomb, depending on whether it could procure fissionable material abroad or produce it itself, is within the range given by other intelligence agencies.

''Intelligence shows that the Iraqi program is almost certainly seeking an indigenous ability to enrich uranium to the level needed for a nuclear weapon,'' the report said.

In a foreword to the report, Mr. Blair said he believed that the compilation of information from Britain's intelligence and security agencies had proved that Mr. Hussein threatened the stability of the world and had to be blocked now.

''What I believe the assessed intelligence has established beyond doubt is that Saddam has continued to produce chemical and biological weapons, that he continues in his efforts to develop nuclear weapons and that he has been able to extend the range of his ballistic missile program,'' he said. ''I also believe that, as stated in the document, Saddam will now do his utmost to try to conceal his weapons from U.N. inspectors.''

The report said Iraq had stored and was continuing to produce chemical and biological agents capable of causing mass casualties, including mustard gas, sarin, anthrax and botulinum toxin.

It added that there were command-and-control arrangements in place to use those chemical and biological weapons, and that intelligence showed Mr. Hussein might have delegated authority over them to his son Qusay.

Mr. Blair, Mr. Bush's staunchest ally on Iraq, was obliged earlier this month to summon Parliament back from summer recess for a one-day session after many lawmakers, mostly from his own party and at least two in his own cabinet, raised doubts about Britain's involvement in an anti-Iraq military campaign.

In a bid to get international support for moving against Iraq, the United States and Britain are preparing a United Nations resolution that would oblige Mr. Hussein to give up his programs to produce weapons of mass destruction and would threaten military action if he did not. Mr. Blair said the measure was just ''days away.'' But opposition to any specific mention of military action is strong in the Security Council.

President Jacques Chirac of France said he still placed his faith in the weapons inspectors. China said it would study any United Nations draft resolution on Iraq, referring to the American and British plan to propose a measure threatening military action if Iraq did not disarm.

The report said Mr. Hussein had recalled specialists to work on his nuclear weapons program.

It asserted that Iraq had rebuilt chemical plants destroyed during the Persian Gulf war in 1991, and it published satellite pictures of two of them surrounded by high walls, watchtowers and security guards that the report said proved they were for military rather than civilian use. It also said Iraq had developed mobile laboratories for making biological weapons that could escape detection and attack invading troops.

Though it was forced upon him, the high-profile Parliament session gave Mr. Blair an opportunity to chronicle the thinking behind the government's position with the kind of clarity and persuasiveness welcomed in Washington. It also afforded his most vociferous critics at home their sought-for chance to air grievances.

But in the end, the feared revolt was limited to 53 of Labor's 412 members in a concluding technical protest vote.

One of the most prominent Labor skeptics in Parliament, Diane Abbott, said she had found the report unpersuasive. ''Tony Blair will have to do better than this if he wants to convince the British public to go to war,'' she said.

Protesters in an open-top bus outside the House of Commons loudly sang John Lennon's ''Give Peace a Chance.''

While the report put forth no startling new disclosures and provided no ''smoking gun,'' Donald Anderson, head of the foreign affairs select committee, told the Commons that he thought that was one of its merits. ''It's a very British document,'' he said. ''There is no hyperbole. It is low key, yet at the same time it is very sober and chilling.''

Menzies Campbell, the foreign affairs spokesman for the Liberal Democrats, said he was still unconvinced of the need for military action. ''Where is the evidence that containment and deterrence have now failed to the point at which military action is deemed necessary?'' he asked.

The report said Mr. Hussein had retained up to 20 Al Hussein missiles, with a range of 650 kilometers (400 miles), capable of carrying chemical or biological weapons, and it published a map showing that Iraqi weapons under development could reach the whole of the Arab Middle East, Israel, Greece, Cyprus and Turkey. A report by the London-based International Institute of Strategic Studies earlier this month put the number of Al Husseins at 12.

In Baghdad, a government minister denied all the charges. ''Mr. Blair is acting as part of the Zionist campaign against Iraq, and all his claims are baseless,'' Culture Minister Hamed Youssef Hummadi said at a news conference.

Mr. Blair, seeking to sway the opinions of the many critics in Britain who agree that Mr. Hussein is dangerous but believe that he has been effectively contained, said: ''It is clear that, despite sanctions, the policy of containment has not worked sufficiently well to prevent Saddam from developing these weapons. I am in no doubt that the threat is serious and current, that he has made progress on weapons of mass destruction and that he has to be stopped.''

In an implied response to criticism that he has hewn too closely to the Bush administration's hard line on Iraq, he said, ''I believe that faced with the information available to me, the U.K. government has been right to support the demands that this issue be confronted and dealt with.''

John Chipman, director of the International Institute of Strategic Studies, said today that the government's assessment disclosed fresh details about Mr. Hussein's efforts to procure materials abroad for a nuclear program and highlighted Iraq's strategy for confounding new inspections. ''It shows that Iraq has prepared for the possible return of inspectors by developing more sophisticated concealment strategies,'' he told the BBC.

Gary Samore, a nonproliferation specialist who wrote the institute's report, said he had had only public information to go on, while the government had access to intelligence and could thus portray what has happened since United Nations weapons inspectors left Iraq in 1998, just before the United States and Britain began a bombing campaign.

Maj. Charles Heyman, editor of the defense journal Jane's World Armies, told Reuters that ''there really is nothing new'' in the report. He added, ''We were all expecting the evidence for war, and what we got was evidence for U.N. inspections.''

Polls have shown that Britons want action against Mr. Hussein only with United Nations approval, and that view was put forward repeatedly in the debate in Commons today.

The report went out of its way to portray the Iraqi leader as constantly and flagrantly in violation of United Nations rules and resolutions.

In one of the more original entries, the report made its case for Mr. Hussein's diversion of largesse to his own comfort by publishing a drawing of one of his vast presidential palaces overlaid on the distinctly smaller area taken up by Buckingham Palace.

Mr. Blair singled out passages attacking Mr. Hussein's human rights record. ''Read it all, and again I defy anyone to say that this cruel and sadistic dictator should be allowed any possibility of getting his hands on more chemical, biological or even nuclear weapons,'' he said.

The report said that Mr. Hussein was able in 2001 to make $3 billion in ''illicit earnings'' outside the control of the United Nations oil-for-food program. The report did not identify the sources of the money but said it went to finance his luxurious lifestyle and arms development.

Britain's Catalog of Iraq's Race for Forbidden Weapons

The British government's assessment of Iraq's weapons of mass destruction, issued yesterday, drawing on intelligence and other information already available, concludes that Iraq continues to develop such weapons. Among other things, it says Iraq has taken the following steps.

\*Continued producing chemical and biological agents, with military plans and command and control in place to use them.

\*Developed mobile laboratories for military use.

\*Illegally tried to procure controlled materials for potential use in producing chemical and biological weapons and for illegal development of long-range missiles.

\*Tried covertly to acquire technology and materials that could be used to produce nuclear weapons; sought to acquire uranium, though it has no civilian program for using it; and recalled specialists to work on its nuclear program.

\*Illegally kept up to 20 Al Hussein missiles, capable of carrying chemical or biological warheads.

\*Started deploying and extending the range of its missiles, and built an engine test stand for missiles that could reach its gulf neighbors, some NATO members and Israel.

\*Learned lessons from previous inspections and has already begun to conceal equipment and documentation in advance of the return of inspectors.