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Criticism Grows at U.S. Failure to Find Iraqi Weapons

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— By Alan Elsner

WASHINGTON (Reuters) - Criticism is mounting at the failure of the United States to find Iraqi nuclear, chemical or biological weapons programs, with some experts raising questions about U.S. intelligence as well as the way the Bush administration justified the war.

Over a month after the end of hostilities launched by President Bush to find and destroy Iraqi weapons of mass destruction, special U.S. military teams have found little to justify the administration's claim that Iraq was concealing vast stocks of chemical and biological agents and was actively working on a covert nuclear weapons program.

Last week's disclosure that a possible biological mobile weapons lab had been found was the most definitive development so far. Even that discovery, if confirmed, fell far short of claims made by Bush and other officials before the war.

"We can conclude that the large number of deployed chemical weapons the administration said that Iraq had are not there. We can also conclude that Iraq's nuclear weapons program was not nearly as sophisticated as the administration claimed," said David Albright, president of the Institute for Science and International Security and a former U.N. nuclear weapons inspector in Iraq.

U.S. national security adviser Condoleezza Rice told Reuters in an interview on Monday that the United States and its allies were sending a larger team to Iraq to find the missing evidence.

Rice said Iraq appeared to have had a virtually "inspections proof" system of concealing chemical and biological weapons by developing chemicals and agents that could be used for more than one purpose.

That was a far cry from some of the claims being made before the war. Bush in an October 2002 speech said, "We know that the regime has produced thousands of tons of chemical agents, including mustard gas, sarin nerve gas, VX nerve gas. And surveillance photos reveal that the regime is rebuilding facilities that it had used to produce chemical and biological weapons."

Joseph Cirincione of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace said the failure to turn up large-

scale weapons programs pointed to serious problems.

INTELLIGENCE FAILURE?

"Was it a massive intelligence failure? Was it intentional manipulation of information by the Bush administration? Or were the weapons somehow destroyed or slipped out of Iraq?"

"I think it's safe to say the weapons do not exist in the quantities claimed by the administration ... and there simply was not the imminent strategic threat that the president cited as his main cause for going to war," Cirincione said.

Robert Einhorn of the Center for Strategic and International Studies said, "The administration worked very hard to find information that supported its case for military action, although I don't think it consciously fabricated information."

Einhorn and some other experts still urge patience and suggest allowing time for mid-level Iraqi officials and scientists to be interviewed about the weapons programs.

Politically at home it may not matter much to Bush whether evidence is found. Many Americans have concluded the United States was right to remove Iraqi President Saddam Hussein because of his abuses of human rights.

Internationally, it is another matter. Governments which opposed the war will find their original doubts confirmed and will be even more suspicious of U.S. intentions in the future.

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A U.S. soldier stands guard at the looted 'yellow cake' factory, named after the uranium peroxide used as a raw material to make fissile material, at Iraq's former nuclear facility in Tuwaitha, about 15 miles south of Baghdad, May 12, 2003. Nearby villagers stole barrels holding the 'yellow cake' in recent weeks to use in their homes, a move experts say could lead to illnesses such as cancer rising in the area. Photo by Zohra Bensemra/Reuters

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