

washingtonpost.com

White House Backs Off Claim on Iraqi Buy

By Walter Pincus
Washington Post Staff Writer
Tuesday, July 8, 2003; Page A01

The Bush administration acknowledged for the first time yesterday that President Bush should not have alleged in his State of the Union address in January that Iraq had sought to buy uranium in Africa to reconstitute its nuclear weapons program.

The statement was prompted by publication of a British parliamentary commission report, which raised serious questions about the reliability of British intelligence that was cited by Bush as part of his effort to convince Congress and the American people that Iraqi President Saddam Hussein's weapons of mass destruction program were a threat to U.S. security.

The British panel said it was unclear why the British government asserted as a "bald claim" that there was intelligence that Iraq had sought to buy significant amounts of uranium in Africa. It noted that the CIA had already debunked this intelligence, and questioned why an official British government intelligence dossier published four months before Bush's speech included the allegation as part of an effort to make the case for going to war against Iraq.

The findings by the House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee undercut one of the Bush administration's main defenses for including the allegation in the president's speech -- namely that despite the CIA's questions about the assertion, British intelligence was still maintaining that Iraq had indeed sought to buy uranium in Africa.

Asked about the British report, the administration released a statement that, after weeks of questions about the president's uranium-purchase assertion, effectively conceded that intelligence underlying the president's statement was wrong.

"Knowing all that we know now, the reference to Iraq's attempt to acquire uranium from Africa should not have been included in the State of the Union speech," a senior Bush administration official said last night in a statement authorized by the White House.

The administration's statement capped months of turmoil over the uranium episode during which senior officials have been forced to defend the president's remarks in the face of growing reports that they were based on faulty intelligence.

As part of his case against Iraq, Bush said in his State of the Union speech on Jan. 28 that "the British government has learned that Saddam Hussein recently sought significant quantities of uranium from Africa."

The International Atomic Energy Agency told the U.N. Security Council in March that the uranium story -- which centered on documents alleging Iraqi efforts to buy the material from Niger -- was based on forged documents. Although the administration did not dispute the IAEA's conclusion, it launched the war against Iraq later that month.

It subsequently emerged that the CIA the previous year had dispatched a respected former senior

diplomat, Joseph C. Wilson, to Niger to investigate the allegation and that Wilson had reported back that officials in Niger denied the story. The administration never made Wilson's mission public, and questions have been raised over the past month over how the CIA characterized his conclusion in its classified intelligence reports inside the administration.

The report by the House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee followed weeks of hearings by the panel into two intelligence dossiers on Iraq's weapons programs -- one published in September and the other in January -- that the government of Prime Minister Tony Blair used to justify supporting the administration in going to war against Iraq.

Questions about the British government's handling of intelligence have mirrored many of the issues being raised in the United States. But they have created a far greater political uproar in London.

Parliament's response has been notably different than that of Congress. The House and Senate intelligence panels have moved cautiously, with Democrats and Republicans divided over the necessity of full-blown public hearings into the administration's use of pre-war intelligence. The House of Commons moved quickly to investigate the matter, with the Blair government battling accusations that it misled Parliament and members of the Labor Party in persuading them to support an unpopular war.

The commission's report issued yesterday found that Blair and his other key ministers "did not mislead" Parliament in describing the threat from Iraq's alleged chemical, biological and nuclear weapons programs. But the panel did find that the Blair government mishandled intelligence material on Iraq's weapons of mass destruction programs.

The panel said it is too soon to determine whether the government's assertions about Iraq's chemical and biological weapons programs will be borne out, but added that the government's actions "were justified by the information available at the time."

In a major political issue within Britain, the panel found that Alastair Campbell, Blair's communications chief, "did not exert or seek to exert improper influence" in drafting the September intelligence report or a key statement in the document that "the Iraqi military are able to deploy chemical or biological weapons within 45 minutes if ordered to do so."

The panel did find that this statement "did not warrant the prominence given to it" in the first pages of the dossier because it was based on "intelligence from a single, uncorroborated source." The panel asked the Blair government to explain why it was given such a prominent position in the report.

A senior administration official said yesterday that a classified version of a U.S. National Intelligence Estimate on Iraq's weapons programs, completed last September, contains references to intelligence reports that Iraq had attempted to buy uranium from three African countries, not just Niger. The other two countries are Namibia and Gabon, according to intelligence sources. The sources said the reports about other countries have not been confirmed and that some government analysts do not consider the information reliable.

A senior intelligence official said that there were reports of "possible attempts" by Iraqis or their agents to buy uranium, but that "they were all somewhat sketchy."

One Bush administration official said British and U.S. intelligence agencies got their Niger documents from the intelligence service of one country that he refused to name, but that others have identified as Italy.

"We both had one source reporting through some liaison service which said, 'Look what we found,' " this official said. "There were other [intelligence] reporting streams, but it may be that all streams are traced to the same source."

© 2003 The Washington Post Company