

US explanation of Sudanese missile attack unravels

Martin McLaughlin
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The official American explanation of why 17 US cruise missiles were fired at the Al-Shifa pharmaceutical factory in Khartoum has become even less credible in the light of reports that contradict major elements in the Clinton administration account.

Major US media outlets have grudgingly begun to examine the holes in the cover story supplied by the Pentagon and State Department, in the wake of several days of scathing attacks by the European press. The *New York Times*, in a front-page article Thursday, reported that the international agency which oversees the treaty banning chemical weapons had contradicted claims by the Clinton administration that there is no legitimate commercial use for the chemical ethyl methylphosphonothionate (EMPTA), which US agents allegedly found in a soil sample taken from near the Al-Shifa plant.

US officials claimed Monday that the purported detection of the chemical amounted to an airtight case that the Al-Shifa plant was at the least engaged in the production of chemical precursors of nerve gas, if not nerve gas itself. But a spokesman for the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons told the *Times* that EMPTA could be used 'in limited quantities for legitimate commercial purposes,' such as for killing fungus and microbes.

The Al-Shifa plant was the largest supplier of medicines and veterinary supplies for Sudan, producing over half the country's total output of these goods, and it supplied veterinary medicines to Iraq under the UN controlled 'oil-for-food' plan.

Another chemical warfare expert told the *Times* that it would be easy to mistake another substance, an agricultural insecticide called fonofos, for EMPTA, if the chemical testing was not done under laboratory conditions. According to the Clinton administration account, the soil sample at Al-Shifa was taken

clandestinely some months before the missile attack.

The *Times* article also reported the comments of Thomas Carnaffin, a British engineer who was technical manager of the Al-Shifa plant during its construction, from 1992 to 1996. Carnaffin has been widely quoted in the British press, disputing US claims that the plant could have had any chemical weapons function, but his expert testimony was kept out of the major US media for a week after the missile attack.

The ABC television network reported Wednesday that the Al-Shifa plant was added to the cruise missile target list 'literally hours before the attack,' and noted that 'US officials can offer precious little evidence of a direct link between Bin Laden and the plant.'

US officials initially made sweeping claims about the supposed evidence justifying the raid on Khartoum. But according to ABC, these officials now 'say they do not know with certainty whether the VX precursor was manufactured at the plant, was stored there, or may have represented a small quantity of research and development material.'

While the American press has begun to back away from the Pentagon cover story, the British media continues to publish harshly critical exposures of contradictions and outright lies in the US government account.

The *Guardian*, one of the major British dailies, noted August 27 that US officials had shifted their story on another critical issue, and that they 'now acknowledge the plant was dual-use--that is, that it was capable of making drugs as well as nerve agent. But on the day of the attack they said there was no evidence that commercial products were ever sold out of the facility.'

The newspaper cited the impact of the destruction of the plant on the Sudanese economy, not only in the loss of medicines for the human population, especially children, but also in the cost to the stock-breeding industry, one of Sudan's principal sources of foreign exchange.

The *Guardian* published an editorial backing the Sudanese request for a UN investigation into the US attack, commenting: 'That it is not being seriously considered attests to the deterioration of international standards. A unilateral attack across international boundaries is in itself a departure from such standards. Saying that America's privately held evidence should be accepted as sufficient justification for it, even where the government of the country attacked is demanding an inquiry, is another.'

On the same day the leading British business daily, the *Financial Times*, based on interviews with European ambassadors in Khartoum, said there was a consensus that the American raid had been a major blunder. One envoy told the newspaper, 'There is no reason to believe that the US knew what was going on inside that factory, other than with regard to its function as a major supplier of pharmaceuticals.'

The hostility in the international press to the arguments by US officials was expressed at a press conference with Thomas Pickering, the US undersecretary of state. One overseas reporter, citing the arrest of seven Cuban exiles in Florida for plotting the assassination of Castro, asked Pickering whether Cuba would be entitled to attack Miami, with the goal of wiping out the terrorists active there, under the same doctrine which the United States invoked to launch missiles at Sudan and Afghanistan. Pickering sidestepped the question.

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