

New tests refute US claims

No nerve gas on Iraqi missiles

Our reporter
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Independent tests of Iraqi missile fragments conducted by French and Swiss laboratories contradict the findings of a US Army testing center, which claimed last June to have detected the presence of VX, a nerve gas agent, on Iraqi warheads.

At that time the US said it had found decomposed VX on one-quarter of 44 fragments taken from a site used by the Iraqi government to destroy missiles. The warheads had been manufactured prior to the gulf war and had been destroyed by Iraq in accordance with UN demands. The Iraqi regime strenuously denied arming the missiles with VX, asserting it never manufactured VX of sufficient stability to mount on warheads. Baghdad demanded additional tests in a 'neutral country.'

The US findings were used as part of a campaign by the Clinton administration and the media to mobilize public opinion against Iraq. Its immediate aim was to pressure the United Nations into prolonging indefinitely its economic blockade against the already devastated country. One week after the release of the US nerve gas report American warplanes fired missiles at an Iraqi anti-aircraft battery.

The European test results are expected to be made public on September 24, but the results are already known. The London-based Arabic-language newspaper *Al Hayat* last week quoted French officials as saying there was no evidence of the nerve agent. The French and Swiss tests were made on fragments of missile warheads taken from the same site as those examined by the US.

Richard Butler, chairman of the United Nations Special Commission (UNSCOM), the body set up to disarm Iraq, asked for the new tests in response to Iraqi demands. UNSCOM officials went back to the site and collected some 80 missile fragments. It took swabs of

the fragments and sent half to Switzerland and half to France. American and UN officials had confidently predicted that the European tests would confirm the earlier findings.

In response to preliminary reports of the findings by France and Switzerland, the United States stood by the results of its tests. A Pentagon spokesman said the fragments tested by the Europeans came from a different part of the weapons disposal site. He said the results of the new tests 'will not invalidate US findings of VX.' A spokesman for UNSCOM refused to comment on the new findings until the full report is submitted.

On September 16 Iraq threatened to halt all activities by UN arms inspectors unless the Security Council rescinded a resolution suspending the regular review of sanctions. Since the collapse of US plans to launch massive air strikes against Iraq last winter, the United States and its ally Britain have staged one provocation after another aimed at blocking the lifting of sanctions against Iraq and preparing the ground for a new military attack.

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