

Amid mounting international criticism

US backpedals over Sudan raid

Martin McLaughlin
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US government officials admitted Monday that their initial explanations of the rationale for the missile attack on the pharmaceutical factory in Khartoum, the capital of Sudan, were false.

In statements to the *Los Angeles Times*, the unnamed officials conceded that the Clinton administration exaggerated the connection between the Shifa Pharmaceutical factory and Osama bin Laden, and claimed that the White House and Pentagon had been unaware that the factory was Sudan's major producer of medicine for both human and animal consumption.

The *Times* also interviewed a chemist and explosives expert at the Los Alamos National Laboratory in New Mexico who disputed CIA and Pentagon claims that the chemical substance EMPTA, allegedly found by a US spy in a soil sample taken from the Al-Shifa plant, was only used in chemical weapons. 'It's fairly commonly known that these are used in pesticides and herbicides,' the chemist, Mike Hiskey, said.

The Los Angeles newspaper's report came three days after the *New York Times* published a front-page article which stated that 'some of the key statements made by Administration officials to justify the attack have proven to be inaccurate, misleading or open to question.'

These statements--swallowed without question by the American media at the time, and rebroadcast to justify the missile attack--'do not appear to be factual,' the *New York Times* said. This is an extremely delicate way of admitting that the US government lied through its teeth in order to stampede public opinion into supporting an act of unprovoked military aggression.

Among the official lies were the claim that bin Laden was linked to the plant, the description of the plant as a highly secret and secure military-type facility, and the claim that the plant had no commercial output.

The government lies were neither subtle nor difficult to expose. A senior CIA official, for instance, told the American press, 'We have no evidence--or have seen no products, commercial products that are sold out of this facility.' But the factory's medicines are marketed in the Sudan under the Al-Shifa brand name, using the factory's own name to identify its products to Sudanese purchasers. Some of these products are exported to other African countries.

The *New York Times* account also made the first mention of Tom Carnaffin, a British engineer who served as technical manager during the construction of the plant, who has been widely quoted in the British press debunking suggestions that the plant could have been transformed into a chemical weapons facility. It lacked the space to stockpile or manufacture such products, he said.

These accounts in the American press, and the grudging admissions from the Clinton administration, come after more than a week of screaming headlines about a nerve gas factory in the heart of Khartoum, and the 'irrefutable evidence' linking this factory to bin Laden, to the bombings of US embassies in Kenya and Tanzania, and even, by some accounts, to Iraqi President Saddam Hussein.

The change in course is not in response to any criticism or investigative reporting by the American press, but as a result of mounting criticism of the US missile attack in the overseas press, especially in Britain, Germany and elsewhere in Western Europe. The American newspapers have published only a fraction of the information made available in Europe, and the US television networks have broadcast even less.

Over the weekend the German magazines *Der Spiegel* and *Focus* and the newspaper *Welt am Sonntag*

reported that the German ambassador to Sudan, Walter Daum, had challenged the US cover story for the Khartoum attack.

'One can't, even if one wants to, describe the Shifa firm as a chemical factory,' Daum wrote in a letter to the German Foreign Office in Bonn, citing the plant's production of anti-malarial and anti-diarrheal drugs, intravenous fluids and veterinary medicines.

The British business newspaper, the *Financial Times*, quoted a British Foreign Office official who said that his government had no independent evidence that the factory was either involved in chemical weapons production or linked to bin Laden. Britain, the colonial ruler of Sudan for more than 60 years, has a wide network of commercial and political contacts in the country.

The *Observer*, the Sunday edition of the British daily the *Guardian*, interviewed the American chemical engineer who designed the Al-Shifa plant for its first Sudanese owner, Bashir Hassan Bashir. Jobe worked for decades for the huge US drug firm Merck, and after retiring worked overseas as a consultant in Jordan, Egypt, Indonesia and Sudan.

Jobe said he was surprised by the missile attack and the official US statements labeling it a nerve gas factory because he had designed it to produce pharmaceuticals only. Asked whether the plant could have been modified to make weapons, he said, 'No, we didn't intend a dual use for it. We didn't design anything extra in there. The design we made was for pharmaceuticals.'

The Jordanian engineer who supervised construction of the factory, Ahmad Salem, told the *Observer*, 'There is no chance that this factory could be used to produce chemical weapons, it was designed to produce medicine for people and animals.'

Scientists interviewed by the newspaper said that the same ingredients are used for chemical weapons and for everyday products such as an anti-clogging agent for ink, the cherry flavoring commonly used in candies, and for brewing beer.

Meanwhile the diplomatic offensive carried out by the Sudanese government in the wake of the missile attack continues to gain a hearing, at least outside the United Nations Security Council where the United States and Britain exercise a veto.

Demands for an international inquiry have already

been backed by the 22-nation Arab League and similar resolutions are to be presented at a meeting of the Organization of African Unity and a wider conference of nonaligned countries.

So confident were Sudanese officials of the outcome of such an investigation that they offered to permit former US President Jimmy Carter to serve as its chairman.

See Also:

Security Council rejects appeal from Sudan over US missile attack

[29 August 1998]

'Nerve gas factory' claim exposed as hoax: What are the real reasons for the US missile strikes?

[26 August 1998]



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