

Australian agents spied for US in Iraq

More revelations about UNSCOM's role

Mike Head
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Australian spies working as United Nations (UNSCOM) weapons inspectors in Iraq supplied intelligence directly to the United States in the leadup to last December's bombing of Iraq, a former US-appointed UNSCOM leader, Scott Ritter, has told the *Canberra Times*.

According to Ritter, the Howard government in Canberra was well aware that Australian military intelligence officers were involved in the operation to channel surveillance material directly to the US, in breach of the UNSCOM charter.

Ritter said that under heavy pressure from Washington last July, UNSCOM was directed to relay its intelligence data straight to the US National Security Agency. "The July operation was known to the Australian government in almost every detail," he said. Ritter was chief of UNSCOM's Concealment Investigations Unit until he quit last August.

Australian Defence Minister John Moore said the report was false but would not comment further, taking the usual stance of refusing to divulge any information on intelligence matters. A spokesman said: "None of the Australians worked for United States authorities."

Ritter said UNSCOM chief, former Australian diplomat Richard Butler, was fully briefed on the American operation. Butler has repeatedly denied any knowledge that Australians--or any other inspectors--spied on Iraq. In response to Ritter's statements, Butler said none of the Australian inspectors were intelligence agents.

However, the Australian Defence Department has confirmed that over the past 12 months, up to 30 military personnel were sent to work for UNSCOM in Iraq, and that three Defence Force officers were permanently stationed there.

Among them were several intelligence officers expert

in electronic interception, originating from the Defence Signals Directorate (DSD) or the Seventh Signals Regiment. DSD specialises in high technology monitoring of bugging devices and radio transmissions. It operates as part of a world network with the American Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and National Security Agency (NSA) and Britain's MI6, feeding them data from Australasia, Southeast Asia and the South Pacific.

Ritter said the Australians sent to Iraq were "experts in their field". He reported that Australian intelligence agents had come to him in Baghdad last August and expressed concern about what they were doing. "They knew the game, and they know what was happening," he told the newspaper. "They just took a look at what was transpiring, how much data was being collected, how it was being collected. They just put two and two together and realised there was no UN direction on this."

Ritter said all data collected was sent down a phone link to the US, with no questions asked. "My boys would push certain buttons and things would happen and certain data would be sent back."

Ritter's comments follow revelations in London on Monday that officers of Britain's MI6 worked as part of UNSCOM from 1991. Earlier this month it was reported that American and other UN inspectors secretly passed intelligence to Washington, where it was used to identify military, industrial and political targets for the US and British missile attacks on Iraq, including the whereabouts of Saddam Hussein and other Iraqi leaders.

Under Butler's orders, UNSCOM installed US electronic eavesdropping equipment that enabled UN monitors to tap secret communications between the Special Republican Guard and the Special Security

Organisation, the elite units responsible for Saddam's personal security. These units were bombed in the air raids on December 16-19. Inspectors also demanded access to hundreds of sites, including Saddam Hussein's palaces and the headquarters of the ruling Ba'ath Party.

The data from UNSCOM's installations was controlled by the US and shown only to agents from selected countries. Those countries were Britain, Australia, New Zealand and Israel. Information was withheld from UN powers--such as France and Russia--that opposed further bombing.

Australian Prime Minister John Howard was one of the few heads of government in the world to unequivocally endorse the December bombing of Iraq. He was joined by Labor Party leader Kim Beazley, without a murmur of dissent from Labor "left" faction.

The involvement of Australian electronic surveillance operatives confirms that under the cover of conducting inspections for alleged "weapons of mass destruction," UNSCOM established an extensive web of bugging devices and listening stations--for the express purpose of preparing military attacks designed to kill Iraqi leaders and cripple the government.

Butler's Washington-inspired demands for entry to ever more sites had the predictable response of provoking Iraqi objections. Baghdad accurately depicted UNSCOM as a US intelligence gathering exercise. Its objections then became the pretext for renewed bombing and US blocking of French and Russian moves for the lifting of sanctions on Iraq, where they have huge oil and other investments.

Ritter stated that the US-supervised operation began only last July. He may have his own reasons for fixing on that date. It was just a month before he quit UNSCOM, criticising the Clinton administration for lacking aggression against Iraq.

The *Boston Globe* reported on January 6 that UNSCOM's relations with US intelligence services underwent a critical change in February 1996, at the initiative of Ritter himself. UNSCOM began to target not only supposed Iraqi nuclear, biological and chemical weapons facilities--within its mandate from the UN Security Council--but also the internal security and counter-intelligence apparatus. It is then that US eavesdropping equipment was first installed.

Butler's predecessor, Rolf Ekeus, wrote to CIA director John Deutch in September 1996 to complain

that the US agency was not sharing the data obtained. This began a series of conflicts between UNSCOM and the CIA over control of the joint operation, resulting in Ekeus's replacement by Butler in May 1997 and a complete US takeover of the equipment in March 1998.



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