

Simmering tensions in UN Security Council as

Richard Butler denounces Kofi Annan

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The public war of words being conducted by former United Nations Special Commission (UNSCOM) Iraq weapons inspection chief, Richard Butler, against UN secretary general Kofi Annan, is part of an increasingly sharp conflict between the major powers on the UN Security Council over relations with Iraq.

In the first week of August, Butler gave a series of interviews with Associated Press Television News, BBC television's *Newsnight* program, the new US-based *Talk* magazine, and the *Age* newspaper in Australia. With each interview his charges against Annan escalated, culminating in the accusation that Annan's office collaborated with the regime of Saddam Hussein to halt UNSCOM efforts to discover and destroy "weapons of mass destruction" in 1998.

In the *Age* interview published on August 5, Butler declared: "There was a convergence of interests between Saddam Hussein and Kofi Annan. Saddam wanted UNSCOM out of his life so he could get on with his weapons program and Annan and his people wanted UNSCOM out of their lives because it was too independent.

"Kofi Annan and his people sought to hand to Saddam Hussein the greatest possible prize—the destruction of UNSCOM.

"There was a view in Mr Annan's office that a major part of the problem with all these recurrent Iraq crises was not Iraq's concealment of weapons or its blocking of inspections, but UNSCOM."

A career diplomat and high profile UN official, Butler did not seek reappointment as head of UNSCOM in June of this year following revelations that the weapons inspection teams had become a front for US spying operations in Iraq.

Since leaving his UN post, Butler has been appointed a "diplomat in residence" at the Council on Foreign Relations in New York—a leading US foreign policy think tank. The views he espouses from his plush office in Park Avenue express opinions circulating in the Clinton administration and the US foreign policy establishment about relations with the UN and with Iraq.

The UN Security Council has been a battleground over Iraq since the US and Britain launched the four day "Operation Desert Fox" bombings in December 1998. The bombings followed an UNSCOM report, drafted by Richard Butler and US government officials, alleged that Iraq was not complying with weapons inspections. Military action was opposed and condemned by three out of five permanent members of the council: France, Russia and China.

Tensions remain over the lifting of economic sanctions and the continuing airstrikes against Iraq. A meeting in late June was presented with three different proposals for overcoming the stalemate.

A British-Dutch proposal, supported tentatively by the US, tied the lifting of sanctions to the completion of "key remaining tasks" of weapons destruction by Iraq and the resumption of monitoring and inspection. The resolution has been described as largely a continuation of the old policy.

Russia and China proposed the lifting of sanctions and establishment of a new arms control body to replace UNSCOM. France supported the

Russia-China proposal, but had its own draft proposal for lifting sanctions in steps and maintaining financial controls over Iraq.

No agreement could be reached and Britain's UN ambassador, Jeremy Greenstock told reporters that "fundamental difficulties remain." A comment in the *Financial Times* on August 9 warned that the ongoing deadlock "undermines the credibility of the Security Council". It says the search for a solution, "must not deepen divisions in the council... A resolution on Iraq should therefore be put to the vote only if it commands general agreement in the west."

Russia and France have publicly condemned ongoing airstrikes, which killed at least 34 civilians and wounded another 40 in Iraq during July. In the wake of the latest attacks, the Pentagon has confirmed that US-British planes have conducted 108 bombing missions against Iraq since the beginning of the year.

Following the July 18 bombings near Najaf, a French Foreign Ministry spokesperson, Anne Gazeau-Secret, told the BBC, "One cannot but feel uneasy about the continuation of these raids for months whose aim we do not fully understand."

The Russian Foreign Ministry spokesperson Vladimir Rakhmanin bluntly described the airstrikes as a "crude violation of the fundamental norms of international law."

Iraq has rejected both the British and French proposals for lifting sanctions as inadequate and appealed to the UN and Arab League to halt US-British attacks. The country is now entering the tenth year of economic sanctions imposed by the UN following the August 1990 invasion of Kuwait. According to Denis Halliday, a former UN coordinator of humanitarian aid to Iraq, the sanctions are responsible for the death of up to 6,000 Iraqi people every month.

Just as the recent war against Yugoslavia proceeded with spurious and exaggerated claims of "ethnic cleansing" and "genocide", the US-British bombardment of Iraq last December was accompanied by an unending chorus of accusations that Iraq was manufacturing and stockpiling "weapons of mass destruction".

Now that the war in Yugoslavia is finished for the present, the major imperialist powers are returning to unfinished business in the Persian Gulf. As no weapons inspections have taken place since December 1998, the old bogey of "weapons of mass destruction" is being revived with Butler asserting—in the face of overwhelming evidence to the contrary—that Iraq continues chemical, biological and nuclear weapons programs.

A brief review of events in Iraq in 1997 and 1998, and the role of Richard Butler and UNSCOM, shows that the conflict between Iraq and the UN agency centred on the latter's spying activities.

It is now openly acknowledged that UNSCOM was thoroughly riddled with intelligence agents working for the US, Britain and Israel since its beginnings in 1991. A close relationship existed between the UN inspection agency and US intelligence agencies, which supplied UNSCOM with high-tech equipment enabling the UN inspectors to

eavesdrop on secret communications between the elite military units responsible for Hussein's personal security.

In September 1996, then-chairman of UNSCOM, Swedish diplomat Rolf Ekeus, had complained in a letter to CIA Director John Deutch that the US agency was not sharing the fruits of the electronic monitoring conducted by UNSCOM inspectors on the ground in Baghdad. This was the first of a series of clashes between UNSCOM and the CIA over control of the joint operation, which resulted in the resignation of Ekeus.

Butler was appointed head of UNSCOM in July 1997. Under Butler's direction, UNSCOM actively sought to engineer a pretext for military strikes, in line with US policy. When Iraq demanded the removal of US spies from the UNSCOM inspection teams in November 1997, Butler accused them of non-compliance with the Security Council, precipitating a crisis. Subsequent public exposure of the US spying operations proves that the Iraqi demands were entirely legitimate.

Significantly, in the *Age* interview, Butler traces the beginning of his conflict with Annan to this time. He says that Annan was prepared to comply with the demands of Iraq, asking why weapons inspections could not be carried out without American involvement. In spite of the opposition of the UN chief, Butler withdrew his inspection teams from Iraq, and the US geared up for airstrikes.

Butler complains that Annan preferred diplomacy over force in dealing with Iraq. Like the US military and national security establishment, he was outraged when Annan averted military action with a last minute diplomatic settlement in Iraq on February 22, 1998. As the deadline for military action by the US and Britain approached, Annan's office—at the urging of France in particular, and with the support of Russia and China—secured an agreement to allow the return of the UNSCOM inspectors.

The *World Socialist Web Site* noted at the time, "In this instance the UN became the vehicle for sections of the European bourgeoisie whose imperialist interests in the Gulf have brought them into conflict with American policy ... French transnational corporations have large investments in Iraq's oil industry and stand to benefit enormously from a lifting of UN sanctions. Similarly, the Yeltsin regime in Russia, the other major sponsor of Annan's mission, has definite economic and strategic interests in Iraq..."

After Annan's diplomatic agreement, Butler and his teams returned to Iraq and a new round of provocations began. Scott Ritter, a former weapons inspector who quit in 1998, confirms that following their return to Iraq in March 1998, UNSCOM monitoring of Iraqi communications ended, and the CIA unilaterally took control.

There are claims that Richard Butler, having been persuaded by Clinton administration officials, facilitated the handover of intelligence gathering to Washington. Butler denies any knowledge of US intelligence operations and told the *Age* that he did not believe that it had occurred.

Ritter contradicts Butler's claims of ignorance and says there was a difference between gathering information for UNSCOM and gathering information for Washington. "Stuff was being collected without our knowledge and without Butler's knowledge," he told interviewers. "That's espionage. My team was worried. I told Butler about it—the American operation—and said we had to shut it down. It didn't happen."

Having learned their lesson from February, the US and Britain did not refer military strikes to the UN in December. When Butler presented his report alleging Iraqi obstruction and non-compliance with weapons inspections, and withdrew his teams from Iraq, US-British forces attacked. France, which had until then participated in air patrols, withdrew its aircraft from the allied forces.

A recent article by Seymour Hersh in the *New Yorker* cites US intelligence sources confirming that a central aim of "Operation Desert Fox" was the assassination of Saddam Hussein. Among targets in the first wave of bombings were private residences, identified by UNSCOM

monitoring, where Hussein reportedly entertained his lovers.

Butler alleges Annan's office sought to undermine UNSCOM because it was too "independent" of the UN. It is incontrovertible, however, that UNSCOM—created by the UN Security Council with a mandate to investigate and ensure compliance with weapons control—had become, by early 1998, an instrument of a US policy agenda of overthrowing the government of Iraq by the use of military force.

This was known by the UN chief. A source close to Annan, quoted in the *Washington Post* in January 1999, explained the antagonisms between the UN chief and UNSCOM in the following terms: "The secretary-general has become aware of the fact that UNSCOM directly facilitated the creation of an intelligence collection system for the United States in violation of its mandate. The United Nations cannot be party to an operation to overthrow one of its member states. In the most fundamental way, that is what's wrong with the UNSCOM operation."

In the "most fundamental way", this is what is "wrong" with Kofi Annan and the UN in the eyes of Richard Butler and US foreign policy circles. The US goal was to kill Saddam Hussein, overthrow his government, and establish a more compliant regime. Annan's office however echoed the interests of Russia, China and France, which had their own interests in Iraq and did not wish to see a US puppet regime established.

Butler's attacks on Annan do not only concern Iraq but are part of a broader US foreign policy agenda. In February 1998, when Annan's diplomacy removed the pretext for US airstrikes, there were bitter recriminations within the US political establishment. Typical was the comment of right-wing columnist William Kristol, who wrote: "It is ridiculous for us to make a serious matter of national interest hostage to negotiations conducted by the secretary general of the United Nations."

Since then the US has increasingly operated outside of the auspices of the UN. Accepting no limitations on its freedom of activity, the US has conducted on-going military strikes on Iraq regardless of opposition within the Security Council. The entire 78-day bombardment of Yugoslavia early this year was conducted under the auspices of NATO, without UN Security Council approval, and in contravention of international law.

Butler has prepared an article for the forthcoming issue of the prestigious *Foreign Affairs* magazine which sheds light on the trajectory of the debate in US ruling circles. Criticising the UN Security Council for failing to implement arms control in Iraq, he lays the blame on the veto powers because they "are abused by permanent members in defence of interests, client States and ideological concerns that very often had nothing to do with maintaining peace and security."

In other words, while Russia, China and France have "interests, client states and ideological concerns", American concerns are equated with "peace and security". Stripped of their self-justification, Butler's views coincide with a rising tide of opinion in ruling circles that in the present period of increasing great power conflicts, the UN has outlived its purpose as a means of furthering US interests.



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