

Why won't Washington allow the UN weapons inspectors into Iraq?

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There is simply no credible justification for the refusal of the Bush administration this week to allow the return of UN weapons inspectors to Iraq. In fact, White House spokesmen have not even bothered to try.

The US and its military allies invaded and occupied Iraq on the pretext that the Hussein regime had vast stocks of "weapons of mass destruction," and that it refused to cooperate with UN inspection teams or abide by a series of UN resolutions stretching back to 1991.

If there were any truth in its claims, Washington would have welcomed the involvement of UN weapons experts to provide independent verification, and thus a veneer of legitimacy, to the US occupation of Iraq. The UN and related international bodies, such as the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), are, after all, the only bodies mandated to carry out weapons inspections in Iraq or anywhere else.

Instead, the Bush administration is now doing everything it accused Saddam Hussein of. It is refusing to abide by the terms of UN resolutions on Iraq. It has arrogantly rejected calls by Russia, France and other countries for the return of UN inspection teams. And it baldly declares that its officials and scientists should be believed without independent corroboration. In short, the US is acting as a "rogue state," flouting the demands of the "international community".

The only difference is that Iraq, which was in no position to militarily challenge the US, acceded to the demands of the UN Security Council, provided voluminous documentation to back its claims and allowed UN inspectors to scour the country. Relying on its armed might, the Bush administration, in the manner of Mafia gangsters, lays down the law and proclaims to the world: stop me if you can!

John Negroponte, the US ambassador to the UN, abruptly dismissed French and Russian demands for UN inspections, without offering any justification. He simply declared: "For the time being, and for the foreseeable future, we visualise that [inspections] as being a coalition activity. The coalition has assumed responsibility for [the] disarming of Iraq."

The statements of White House spokesman Ari Fleischer were no better. "Saddam Hussein's regime is gone, and we need to reassess the framework design to disarm the regime given the new facts on the ground," he intoned to the media. What are the "new facts on the ground" to justify a ban on UN inspectors? All Fleischer would say, several times, was: "We are looking forward,

not backward." In other words: don't rehash the past.

The only plausible explanation for this extraordinary behaviour is the most straightforward. The Bush administration's criminal war of aggression against a small, impoverished and largely defenceless country was based on a colossal lie. Iraq had no so-called weapons of mass destruction, or their so-called precursors, or the means for manufacturing them and the Bush administration knew it.

Having secured control of the country, Washington is not about to allow the truth to be exposed. The US cannot afford to permit any inspection teams into Iraq that are not directly under its control. It thus has barred the former chief UN inspectors Hans Blix and Mohamed El Baradei, who, as well as being technical experts, have in the past demonstrated a modicum of independence and integrity.

Blix, who briefed a closed session of the UN Security Council on Tuesday on the readiness of his inspectors to return to Iraq, made guarded criticisms of the Bush administration this week. While not questioning the integrity of US inspectors, he pointedly declared: "America is not going to convince the rest of the world it has uncovered a chemical or biological threat in Iraq if it persists in refusing to submit any find to independent, outside assessment."

With more than a touch of irony, Blix noted that it was "conspicuous that so far [US inspectors] have not stumbled on anything". In the weeks leading up to the US-led invasion, the Bush administration poured scorn on the UN inspectors, claiming that the Hussein regime was running rings around them. Washington claimed to have irrefutable intelligence on Iraqi "weapons of mass destruction" but refused to hand it over to Blix claiming that to do so would "compromise sources".

Most of Iraq has been firmly under US control for a fortnight. Yet despite strenuous attempts by US troops and specialists to uncover a "smoking gun" to justify the war, nothing has been found other than gas masks and protective clothing dating back to the Iraq-Iran war of the 1980s. A search of more than 80 of the 100 most likely hiding places identified by the US has turned up no WMDs. The irrefutable intelligence has proven to be completely worthless.

Where is Iraq's purported capacity to "deploy nuclear weapons within 45 minutes" sensationally highlighted in Blair's dossier last September? Or the much-vaunted aluminium tubes which Bush and US officials insisted were to construct gas centrifuges for uranium enrichment? No wonder Mr Fleischer would prefer to

look forwards, rather than backwards, in the hope that the world will simply forget the past lies. And if the issue refuses to go away, the US has dispatched its own 1,000-strong inspection team, which provides ample scope for a convenient “find” that will fix the problem.

The US and the British have already been caught out fabricating documents to demonstrate that Iraq imported uranium from Niger. Blix expressed his concerns on BBC radio, saying: “I think it’s been one of the most disturbing elements that so much of the intelligence on which the capitals built their case seemed to have been shaky.” He went on to ask: “Is it not disturbing that the intelligence agencies that should have all the technical means at their disposal did not discover that this was falsified? I think that’s very, very disturbing. Who falsifies this?”

The flimsiness of the US case was underscored from the outset by the fact that the Bush administration originally opposed any return of UN weapons inspectors to Iraq. Last August, Vice President Richard Cheney baldly declared that Iraq possessed an arsenal of chemical and biological weapons and was on the verge of developing a nuclear bomb. Dismissing those in US ruling circles who argued for UN involvement to provide a fig leaf of legitimacy, Cheney countered: “A return of [UN] inspectors would provide no assurance whatsoever of his [Hussein’s] compliance with UN resolutions.”

Washington only accepted UN inspections of Iraq very reluctantly, when it became apparent that not to do so would leave the US completely isolated internationally. In return, however, the Bush administration insisted on the most stringent inspection regime ever put in place, hoping that the Hussein regime would refuse, but knowing that if it did comply, the requirements would be virtually impossible to achieve.

UN Security Council resolution 1441, passed in early November, provided a series of extremely short deadlines for full and comprehensive Iraqi declarations of weapons capacity. UN inspection teams were allowed back into Iraq with unprecedented powers to search anywhere, at any time and without any notice. Provision was made for private interviews with Iraqi scientists, including outside Iraq, and for “free and unrestricted use” of all forms of aerial surveillance.

To Washington’s disappointment, the Hussein regime announced that it would comply in full with this deliberately provocative and humiliating resolution. It not only provided thousands of pages of documentation on time but allowed UN inspection teams unfettered access to all sites. Weeks of inspections produced no “smoking gun” despite hundreds of unannounced visits, including raids on private homes. Documents and a few old empty chemical shells were all that was found.

Blix and El Baradei did not want to offend Washington but, with opposition mounting in Europe, neither were they prepared to simply act as mouthpieces for the Bush administration. Their reports to the UN Security Council accused Hussein of failing to cooperate fully, particularly in compelling reluctant Iraqi scientists to grant private interviews and giving the green light for spy flights. At the same time, however, they made clear that no weapons had been discovered.

Washington’s impatience resulted in increasingly stinging

criticism of the UN inspectors, particularly after Blix’s second report to the UN Security Council in mid-February noted Iraq’s “improved cooperation” and disparaged US claims that Iraq was duping his teams. In the same UN session, El Baradei’s report was even more unfavourable, concluding that, to date, there was no evidence of prohibited nuclear activities in Iraq.

In comments this week, Blix noted somewhat bitterly that in March, the US had leaked stories about an unmanned drone capable of dispersing chemical or biological weapons in a bid to undermine UN inspectors. “The US was very eager to sway votes in the Security Council, and they felt that stories about these things would be useful to have, and they let it out,” he said. “And thereby they tried to hurt us and say that we suppressed this. It was not the case, and it was a bit unfair, and hurt us.”

When Iraq agreed to destroy its Al Samoud 2 missiles, which had a range marginally in excess of the 150km prescribed by UN resolutions, the US was left with no concrete evidence, not even of the most threadbare kind, on which to claim that Iraq had breached resolution 1441. When a mixture of bullying and bribery failed to convince a majority of the UN Security Council to pass a second resolution providing the pretext for war, the US and Britain simply declared war unilaterally. The UN weapons inspectors were effectively given the same ultimatum as Saddam Hussein: pack your bags and get out of Iraq or face the consequences.

No one should be under any illusion that, by demanding the return of Blix to Iraq, Russia, France and other countries are now pressing for the truth to be established about Iraq’s alleged weapons capacity. The issue is simply a convenient lever for Paris, Berlin and Moscow to try to apply some pressure to Washington to make concessions to their economic and strategic interests in Iraq and the Middle East.

The failure of the UN and now US inspection teams to find anything resembling prohibited weapons in Iraq simply demonstrates that Washington, with the complicity of the UN, European and other major powers, has been perpetrating an elaborate charade. Since the mid-1990s it has been glaringly evident that Iraq’s embryonic nuclear program was dismantled along with its capacity to produce significant amounts of chemical and biological weapons. What it did have had either degraded or been destroyed.

Yet “weapons of mass destruction” continued to be the pretext for keeping crippling economic sanctions, which claimed the lives of an estimated half million Iraqis, for maintaining the carve-up of Iraq through “no-fly zones” and for ongoing airstrikes against Iraqi targets. Now this gigantic lie is being used to justify the neo-colonial subjugation of the country. That is why the Bush administration cannot allow the return of UN inspectors or anyone else who threatens to expose the truth.



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