

Britain: Blair under pressure over failure to find weapons of mass destruction in Iraq

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Every day that has passed since United States and British forces seized control of Iraq has left the claims that war was waged in order to eliminate the threat from weapons of mass destruction looking more threadbare.

According to the latest reports from Washington, American military forces are changing their search strategy after admitting unsuccessful searches of more than 80 of the top 100 likely hiding places for chemical and biological weapons as well as being unable to find evidence of an Iraqi nuclear programme—as identified by prewar US intelligence.

After more than a month of enjoying unrestricted access and searching mosques, homes, factories and government ministries all that is on offer from the Bush administration and the military are a series of evasions. Lt. Gen. David McKiernan, the commander of land forces in Iraq, merely said, “This regime over the last decade has been pretty good at hiding material and moving it around, so it was no surprise to any of us that many of these sites that we’ve already exploited have not necessarily turned up the material.”

Washington has refused point blank to allow a resumption of weapons inspections by the United Nations, prompting Hans Blix, the UN’s chief weapons inspector, to comment, “It is conspicuous that so far they have not stumbled upon anything.”

This is embarrassing for the Bush administration, but even more so for British Prime Minister Tony Blair. The Labour government faced widespread opposition to Blair’s support for a US-led war against Iraq, including from within his own party in the form of two separate parliamentary revolts insisting that war could only be declared with UN backing.

So great is the extent of public mistrust of the official rationale for the war that sections of the media and the political establishment have said that even if US forces claim in future to have found evidence of weapons programs, no one will believe it was not forged or otherwise manufactured by the CIA, the FBI or the Pentagon. The planned 1,000-strong Anglo-American inspection team has been dubbed *Usmovic*—a reference to the UN’s *Unmovic*—by those cynical of its independence.

UN Security Council members France, Russia and Germany are all pushing for the US to allow UN inspectors to Iraq.

In response, a desperate Geoff Hoon, Britain’s Defence

Secretary, has held out the prospect of the search for banned weapons being conducted by a country that is not a member of the US-led coalition as opposed to an Anglo-American team—the sole purpose of which was to back up his insistence that the UN is not the only body capable of providing independent verification of Iraq’s alleged weapons of mass destruction program.

This will not help Blair’s position. When the final vote in parliament on whether to support war was held on March 18, he insisted that he possessed intelligence that proved Iraq had been concealing weapons from the UN. It could not be revealed, he said, as it would endanger Britain’s sources. Several wavering MPs claimed to have been swayed by the assurances of MI6 and other intelligence agencies that this was the case.

To make matters worse for Blair, Britain had issued two intelligence dossiers claiming to expose Iraq’s secret weapons programmes which had both been the subject of severe criticism.

On September 24, 2002, Blair issued a dossier that was widely disregarded at home and internationally as propaganda. Its 50 pages were full of assertions, half-truths and outright lies provided by Washington but sold as the work of the British government—claiming for example that Iraq “could deploy nuclear weapons within 45 minutes” and that Saddam Hussein’s presidential palaces were in fact “large compounds which are an integral part of Iraqi counter-measures designed to hide weapons material”.

This looks pretty sick after the events of the past months, where all the palaces have been bombed, then searched.

Blair’s second dossier was issued on February 3, 2003 and billed as a product of up-to-the-minute British intelligence gathering. It was famously praised by US Secretary of State Colin Powell during his February 5 address to the UN Security Council, before being exposed as having been extensively plagiarised from three articles, one written by an American graduate student, all of which were months and even years old.

Blair is therefore highly vulnerable to criticism should no weapons be found and cannot simply state that his aim was really regime change all along and hope to bask in the reflected glow of military victory.

Many former dissident Labour MPs are more than ready to

make their peace with Blair, but criticism within parliament persists. And this is only a pale reflection of the extent of public disquiet and the belief that the prime minister was lying.

Labour's Alice Mahon is one of several MPs who are pressing for a parliamentary inquiry into whether the public was misled over Iraq's alleged weapons of mass destruction. Others include Lindsay Hoyle, who says he voted in favour of war because he was told there was "hard evidence" of an Iraqi weapons programme, Doug Henderson and former Defence Minister David Hinchliffe.

Mahon has insisted that UN inspectors be allowed to continue the search for nuclear, chemical and biological weapons in Iraq. She told the *Independent On Sunday*, "There is cynicism about the US and a number of people have said to me, 'they will find them (WMDs) because they will take their own in there with them.' That was the reason we went to war so lets get it verified."

In the House of Commons, Lindsay Hoyle said, "We were led to believe that the Iraqis could fire them within 45 minutes. If that was the case where have they vanished to? We were told there was hard evidence."

Doug Henderson warned, "If by the turn of the year there is no WMD then the basis on which this was executed was illegal."

David Hinchliffe, now chairman of the Commons health committee, said, "For many of us who talked to ministers there was an implication that more was known. Therefore a lot of people are anxious to establish the truth."

Robin Cook, who resigned from Blair's Cabinet in protest at the war, has also called for UN inspectors to be brought in to verify any find. The former foreign secretary's resignation speech had noted, "Iraq probably has no weapons of mass destruction in the commonly understood sense of the term."

Former cabinet minister Gavin Strang has also said the coalition must allow UN inspectors back into Iraq.

The call for an inquiry by the cross-party Commons Intelligence and Security Committee is said to enjoy the support of a number of backbench Labour MPs. One unnamed but apparently "well-placed" former minister told the *Guardian* newspaper, "The intelligence committee is raring to challenge the veracity of what the security services told them about Saddam Hussein's chemical weapons. They were told what he had and where it was. There may be a perfectly innocent explanation for all this, but they don't seem to be able to find the stuff."

On April 20, the Conservative opposition opposed the demand for a Commons inquiry, in line with its policy of supporting Blair on Iraq. But it did say, "There should be proof, and as soon as possible, that weapons of mass destruction do exist. A call for an inquiry is premature, but the international community will not trust America—and potentially us—in future opinions if the reason given for the war does not turn out to be valid".

Keeping their options open, they added that in the long term an inquiry might prove necessary and even raised the possibility of a return of UN inspectors. "We would certainly support the general principle that there has to be an appropriate inquiry into the extent to which Saddam had weapons of mass destruction but we are still confident they will find the kind of materials they were talking about," said a spokesman.

Former Conservative Prime Minister John Major told the BBC that it is "very important for the perception of the rest of the world" that the coalition finds Iraq's WMD because "they were a fundamental reason that persuaded many people to support the war."

If the weapons of mass destruction were not found, he explained, "one then has to ask a few questions about the intelligence provided to the British or American governments."

Leading Tory and now European Union Commissioner, Chris Patten, has also said the return of UN weapons inspectors to Iraq was vital.

The Liberal Democrat foreign affairs spokesman, Menzies Campbell, said calls for a parliamentary inquiry did not go far enough and insisted that the government push for UN weapons inspectors to be allowed back into Iraq.

He told the *Independent on Sunday*, "Any inquiry held in the UK or the US will inevitably be accused of bias. The only credible approach is to allow Dr Blix and Unmovic to complete the mandate the UN Security Council gave them under Resolution 1441. Only the United Nations will be trusted."

Defence Minister Lewis Moonie has rejected the calls for an inquiry, with the somewhat pathetic appeal, "Do not forget we have only been in Iraq for four weeks."

Asked if Blair himself would assist such an inquiry, a Downing Street spokesman said: "We don't believe any inquiry is needed, as we stand by our assessment that Saddam harboured an active WMD programme. We have had a conflict to fight as well as getting humanitarian aid to the people, but we are confident of finding weapons of mass destruction in the longer term."



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