

Looting of nuclear sites poses deadly threat in Iraq

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The illegal war waged against Iraq on the pretext of halting the proliferation of “weapons of mass destruction,” appears to have resulted in precisely the spread of potentially deadly nuclear materials that the US invasion was supposedly meant to curtail. Those who will suffer the immediate consequences are the Iraqi people as well as US soldiers deployed in the area.

According to numerous reports from Iraq, several major nuclear sites have been repeatedly looted over the course of the past month, since the US military took control of Baghdad. High levels of radiation have been detected in several neighborhoods as a result of looters carting off nuclear materials.

Of particular concern is the status of the Tuwaitha Nuclear Research Center, a 120-acre site about six miles outside of the Iraqi capital. The center of the Iraqi government’s non-military nuclear program, it contained several tons of enriched uranium and natural uranium—metals suitable for processing into the core of a nuclear weapon. These nuclear materials had been kept in barrels sealed and regularly monitored by UN nuclear inspectors before they were withdrawn from Iraq on the eve of the US invasion.

An Iraqi scientist who helped established the site told Al Jazeera television that nuclear materials had been spread far and wide by the looting. Visiting the center soon after it was initially ransacked, he said he found that some radioactive materials had been taken away while others were dumped on the ground. Much of it was in powder form and was likely dispersed in the air, he added.

The scientist, Dr. Hamid Al Bah’ly, said that looters had stolen large containers that contained radioactive uranium. He said he believed that in some cases people washed these containers out in a nearby river, contaminating the water supply.

Abu Dhabi television, meanwhile, has shown footage of women using the containers to store drinking water. Al Bah’ly said that in inspecting homes near the Tuwaitha site he has found people using the containers to hold water, milk and tomatoes. Some of them had also been used to transport milk to a yogurt factory, he added.

According to one published report, three people died last week in the village of Wardieh, just southeast of Baghdad, after being contaminated by material stolen from the Tuwaitha site. The report cited a witness, who said that villagers buried the dead along with the material. Al-Jazeera interviewed workers at Tuwaitha who said that they had tried to chase looters away, but were unable to stop the large numbers of people. They criticized US occupation authorities, saying that there was only a token American military guard at the nuclear site.

The *Washington Post* reported separately Sunday on a visit by a Pentagon team to a radioactive waste site about a mile from Tuwaitha. The *Post* said that the inspection followed a “month of official indecision” and that the team “found the site heavily looted and said it was impossible to tell whether nuclear materials were missing.”

The site, known as the Baghdad Nuclear Research Facility, is built on the remains of nuclear reactors that were bombed by Israeli warplanes in 1981. It was used to store highly radioactive industrial and medical wastes, along with spent reactor fuel.

Again a token US guard at the gate of the facility failed to keep out looters, who numbered as many as 400 a day. According to the *Post*, US soldiers also allowed scores of Iraqis who identified themselves as employees to pass freely through the gate. Lacking any Arab translator, the soldiers were unable to verify their

identity or determine what they were doing there.

Out of seven sites visited by US military experts since the end of organized Iraqi military resistance last month, all had been looted, the *Post* reported.

In a report to the United Nations Security Council last month, International Atomic Energy Agency Director ElBaradei said his agency had informed Washington about the need for tight control and protection of the Tuwaitha site and passed along detailed information about the precise location of dangerous nuclear materials.

Most of these were stored in a three-building complex known as “Location ,c” which contained nuclear material restricted by the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty as well as radioisotope sources. The IAEA had placed seals on drums containing nuclear materials as well as on the buildings themselves.

The IAEA, meanwhile, has warned that the materials stored at the looted nuclear sites could be used in the manufacture of a so-called “dirty bomb.” US intelligence agencies have charged that the Al-Qaeda organization of Osama Bin Laden had elaborated plans for the use of such a weapon, which is designed to spread radioactive material over a wide area.

“IAEA said over the weekend that it found reports that there had been looting at Iraq’s nuclear facilities disturbing and it has requested that the United States confirm the situation and allow for an IAEA team to investigate,” said a United Nations spokesman, Fred Eckhard.

Thus far, the Bush administration has stonewalled the IAEA, maintaining that it will “eventually” allow its inspectors back in, but that there is no immediate plan to grant them a role in Iraq. It is carrying out this exclusion despite the fact that the UN inspectors are the only ones who have a detailed knowledge of what was stored at the looted sites and therefore are able to confirm what has been taken. This seemingly irrational refusal to allow the inspectors to carry out this urgent task is bound up with Washington’s determination to prevent any international interference in the US installation of its own hand-picked Iraqi puppet regime.

The US media has paid scant attention to these “disturbing” reports. It has focused instead on unsubstantiated claims by the Bush administration that US occupation troops have found a truck in northern Iraq that “could have been used” as a mobile biological

weapons lab. The Pentagon admits that thus far it has found no trace of biological agents on the vehicle.

The relative indifference to what may soon prove the worst nuclear disaster since the Chernobyl meltdown in 1986 underscores the predatory character of the US war and occupation. While Washington denied that control of Iraqi oil was the objective of the US aggression, the Pentagon found ample troops to secure the Iraqi Oil Ministry in Baghdad and the refineries and oil fields near Rumaylah in the south and Kirkuk in the north.

But when it came to securing the site of a program that Bush falsely claimed could be used to “pass nuclear technology to terrorists,” the US exhibited appalling negligence. While the US administration manufactured a threat of Iraqi-based nuclear terrorism as a pretext for an invasion, its own criminal actions may yet turn the pretext into a reality.



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