

Niger president challenges Blair government over uranium allegations

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5 August 2003

The prime minister of Niger, Hama Hamadou, has demanded that British prime minister Tony Blair put up or shut up over his continued allegations that Saddam Hussein had sought to purchase uranium from the African country.

In his first interview since it was claimed that his country had been approached by Iraq, Hamadou told Britain's *Sunday Telegraph*, on July 28, that Blair must produce proof of the allegation. Niger had never had diplomatic or bilateral relations with Iraq, he said, accusing the British and US government of mistreating his country, which sent 500 troops to support the Gulf War in 1991, by making the claim.

"Is this how Britain and America treat their allies? If Britain has evidence to support its claim then it has only to produce it for everybody to see. Our conscience is clear. We are innocent," Hamadou said.

Pointing out that neither Britain nor the US has made a formal accusation of any wrongdoing by his government, he said that the claim originated in efforts by those governments to win public support for their war against Iraq. "Everybody knows that the claims are untrue," he added.

Hamadou is right in pointing out that neither Britain nor the US have made a formal accusation of any wrongdoing by his government. If there had been any truth in the accusations, Niger, the second most impoverished country in the world, would immediately have become a candidate for the so-called "Axis of Evil." Their failure to do so is proof, if proof is still needed, that the original claim was nothing but a pack of lies, used as part of US and British efforts to justify their plans for a pre-emptive attack on Iraq.

The Blair government had first made the accusation public on September 24, 2002, in what has become known as its "dodgy" intelligence dossier, supposedly detailing Iraq's weapons of mass destruction (WMD). "There is

intelligence that Iraq has sought the supply of significant quantities of uranium from Africa. Iraq has no active civil nuclear power programme of nuclear power plants and, therefore has no legitimate reason to acquire uranium," the document stated.

The documents on which these claims were made have subsequently been revealed as crude forgeries. In a press statement on April 29, senior State Department official Paul Kelly revealed that the US first knew of the allegations in late 2001. He added that the US obtained information through several channels, from private sources, US intelligence and two western European allies. According to the Italian publication *Repubblica*, an African diplomat was attempting to sell the forged documents in Italy at that time and there is little doubt that they were made available to US intelligence then.

One of the documents was an agreement supposedly signed on July 6, 2000, confirming the sale of 500 tonnes of uranium to Iraq. It had an accompanying letter, dated October 10, pointing out that it was being sent for information to the Niger ambassador in Rome. The letter's heading contained the words Conseil Militaire Supreme—an organisation that has not existed in Niger since May 1989. Elhadj Habibou, who as foreign minister was supposed to have signed the letter, has not held that office since 1989.

Doubts about the veracity of the information were passed from US intelligence to the White House. Despite this, a State Department fact sheet of December 19, 2002, identified Niger as the country involved. The allegations were repeated by National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice and Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld a month later.

On January 29, 2003, President Bush cited the dossier in his State of the Union address, although he was careful to point out that it was based on intelligence supplied by Britain.

It was not until March of this year that Mohamed El Baradei, head of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), made a statement in the United Nations declaring that the documents were crude forgeries. Apparently, it took only a few hours for IAEA experts to come to this conclusion. Nevertheless, with preparations for war well advanced, the US and Britain stood by their claims.

Just days before the war began Vice President Dick Cheney repeated the allegations. He said, “We know [Saddam’s] been absolutely trying to acquire nuclear weapons, and we believe he has, in fact, reconstituted nuclear weapons.”

He criticised the IAEA for concluding the documents were forgeries, saying, “I think Mr El Baradei frankly is wrong... [The IAEA] has consistently underestimated or missed what it was Saddam Hussein was doing. I don’t have any reason to believe they’re any more valid this time than they’ve been in the past.”

On July 7, the White House was forced to publicly accept that the documents were bogus and has attempted to shift the blame on to British intelligence.

Nonetheless, Blair has continued to defend the allegations. A recent report from the British House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee (FAC) recommended “that the government explain on what evidence it relied for its judgement in September 2002 that Iraq had recently sought significant quantities of uranium from Africa.” The government has refused to answer and continues to insist that the Niger claim did not depend solely on the forgeries but was based on “different intelligence” or “non-documentary evidence”. None of this so-called evidence has been produced.

On July 14, Blair’s spokesman told journalists, “We have always maintained that we stood by the intelligence relating to uranium contained in the September dossier—which, for the avoidance of any doubt, had underlined that Saddam had been ‘seeking’ to acquire uranium, not that he had actually acquired it. The information had been based on intelligence from more than one source, none of which had come from the UK or US. It was drawn on evidence other than the forged documents about which we had no knowledge until 2003.”

In answer to a question from a journalist, the spokesman argued that a visit by an Iraqi delegation to Niger in 1999 “was supportive of our judgement that Iraq had been seeking to acquire uranium.” The fact that Iraq had procured 200 tonnes of uranium from Niger 21 years ago in 1981-1982 was also used to justify the government’s

position. He added that the government stood by the claims made in the September dossier because they were the judgements of the Joint Intelligence Committee, which had assessed the intelligence.

What has become absolutely clear is that all the so-called “sources” cited by Blair’s official stem from the same shoddy forgeries that over a period of almost two years have been continually recycled and dressed up as independent from each other.

No one has tried to explain how the uranium was supposed to be delivered to Iraq. David Harrison, a journalist for the *Sunday Telegraph*, recently visited Niger’s two mines at Arlit, 500 miles from the capital Niamey. He pointed out that production is tightly controlled and the uranium is packed into hermetically sealed drums, which are numbered and dated. They are guarded by gendarmes all along the route to Cotonou in Benin, from which point they are shipped to France.

Serge Martinez, managing director at the Somair mine, rejected the notion that uranium could be stolen or lost on the way as “the stuff of science fiction.” He told the *Sunday Telegraph* that in 40 years “not a single case of uranium has been stolen or lost.” He denied the possibility of any uranium being sold illegally to Iraq, “because all movement of uranium is monitored closely by the companies and the International Atomic Energy Authority”.

For Blair’s accusations to have any justification would imply the culpability of the French government, the destination of all Niger’s uranium. If Blair had any serious evidence that uranium was being diverted to Iraq, he would have either accused France of being complicit or warned his European ally of a serious breach in security.

The fact the UK government has done neither confirms that it has no such evidence. Rather it is cynically taking advantage of Niger’s weakness in world affairs in order to mount a desperate rearguard action to prop up its threadbare and fraudulent justifications for an illegal war.



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