

Iraq war: more revelations of lies over Niger uranium

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Claims made by the British government in its September 2002 “intelligence dossier” to justify the pre-emptive war on Iraq--that Saddam Hussein had weapons of mass destruction that could be deployed within 45 minutes and had attempted to buy nuclear material from Niger in 2001--have been exposed to the world as a pack of lies.

Nevertheless Prime Minister Tony Blair is continuing to defend the dossier, insisting that the war was justified and that his government has exclusive intelligence on Iraq’s weapons programme from an independent source. The British government is now reduced to arguing that the mere fact that an Iraqi delegation visited Niger in 1999 “was supportive of our judgement that Iraq had been seeking to acquire uranium.” (Prime Minister’s Official Spokesman July 14, 2003)

Wissam al-Zahawie, the Iraqi diplomat who went to Niger in 1999, was in London last week on a private visit. In an attempt to set the record straight, and clear his name, Zahawie spoke to Raymond Whitaker of the *Independent on Sunday* newspaper on August 10.

The former diplomat made it clear that his visit to Africa in February 1999 was not exclusively to Niger. He was “instructed to visit four West African countries to extend an invitation on behalf of the Iraqi President to their heads of state to visit Baghdad.”

The invitations were an attempt by Saddam Hussein to break the United Nations embargo that was crippling Iraq’s economy by encouraging foreign leaders to attend a trade fair organised in Baghdad later that year. Whitaker quotes a Middle East analyst who said, “The thinking was that some of these countries were bound to get on the Security Council at some stage, and might cast their votes against sanctions.”

Niger was Zahawie’s first port of call. Invitations

were also extended to the presidents of Burkina Faso, Benin and Congo-Brazzaville. Only President Mainassara of Niger accepted, promising to travel to Baghdad two months later. The visit never took place because Mainassara was assassinated shortly afterwards.

Zahawie retired from the diplomatic service in 2001 and now lives in Jordan. He thought no more about his African trip until early February, when he received an urgent call from the Iraqi embassy in Amman, calling him to the Foreign Ministry in Baghdad as soon as possible.

When he arrived he was told that the UN weapons inspectors wanted to see him. “They were from the International Atomic Energy Agency [IAEA]--three men and two women. Only two of the men spoke, one was British, the other Canadian; the others did not utter a word. It turned out to be, in fact, more of an interrogation than an ‘interview’. No other Iraqi official was present, but I insisted on having the conversation recorded on my own personal cassette recorder,” Zahawie said.

The inspectors asked for details of what he knew about any contacts between Iraq and Niger and the visits exchanged between officials from both countries. They asked him about the purpose of his own visit to Niger in 1999. They also asked whether he had signed a letter on July 6, 2000 to Niger regarding the sale of uranium to Iraq. “I said absolutely not, and if they had seen such a letter it must surely be a forgery... I have never been involved in any secret negotiations. I am willing to co-operate with anyone who wants to see me and find out more.”

Zahawie told the *Independent on Sunday* that he was not shown the documents the inspectors had. Next day he learnt that the director of the IAEA, Mohamed

ElBaradei, was not satisfied with the interview: “The feeling was that I knew more than I was willing to reveal.” He asked for a second meeting with the inspectors at which he denied he had been unhelpful and demanded to see the document. This was refused.

“The inspectors told their Iraqi liaison officer that my denials would be better substantiated if they could obtain an original facsimile of my signature. I sent them, the next day, copies of letters that I had written when I was still in Rome. Those letters must have convinced the IAEA team at long last that the document they had was indeed a forgery.”

A month later, Dr ElBaradei told the Security Council that UN and independent forensic experts had found that the documents were "not authentic". On July 7, the White House was forced to accept that the documents were bogus and should not have been cited in President George W. Bush's State of the Union speech in January.

Many questions remain unanswered. Who carried out the forgeries? Who supplied them and to whom? What was the role played by the British and American intelligence services in the whole affair? Why were they unable to detect the obvious fraud, when it took the IAEA only a few hours to uncover?

Since then, the US has attempted to prevent any further information from Niger. On August 3, the *Sunday Telegraph* reported that that Herman Cohen, former assistant secretary of state for Africa, had visited President Mamadou Tandja the previous week and warned him to keep out of the dispute.

A senior Niger government official told the paper's correspondent that there was a “clear attempt to stop any more embarrassing stories coming out of Niger.” He said that Washington's warning was likely to be heeded. “Mr Cohen did not spell it out but everybody in Niger knows what the consequences of upsetting America or Britain would be. We are the world's second-poorest country and we depend on international trade to survive.”



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