

Britain aided US in spying on UN delegates

Harvey Thompson
13 February 2004

In March 2003 the *Observer* newspaper revealed that the Bush administration had requested help from Britain in conducting a spying operation on key United Nations delegates in the run up to the invasion of Iraq. In a lead article on February 8 this year the paper confirmed that the spies at Government Communications Headquarters (GCHQ) had “acted on” the request.

News of the spying operation—which involved interception of the home and office telephones and the emails of UN delegates in New York—was leaked to the *Observer* by whistleblower Katherine Gun, an officer at GCHQ. Gun was arrested in March 2003 under the Official Secrets Act on charges of passing information to unauthorised persons.

The leaked memo, dated January 31 2003, (four days after the UN’s chief weapons inspector Hans Blix produced his interim report on Iraqi compliance with UN resolution 1441) was sent from US National Security Agency (NSA) official Frank Koza to GCHQ, where Gun worked as a translator. In the memo Koza asked GCHQ to help with covert surveillance of United Nations Security Council (UNSC) delegations that were considered to be wavering over the drive to war against Iraq.

According to intelligence sources quoted by the *Observer*, National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice would have initiated or at least approved the operation and it would also possibly have involved Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, CIA director George Tenet and NSA chief General Michael Hayden. President George W. Bush himself would probably have been informed at one of the daily intelligence briefings held every morning at the White House.

Koza’s memo, marked Top Secret, explained how the NSA had mounted “a surge effort to revive/create efforts against UNSC members Angola, Cameroon, Chile, Bulgaria and Guinea, as well as extra focus on Pakistan UN matters.”

Koza specified that the information would be used for the US’s QRC—Quick Response Capability— “against” the key delegations. The NSA effort would help provide

“the whole gamut of information that could give US policymakers an edge in obtaining results favourable to US goals or to head off surprises.”

Koza asked for the help of British analysts who “might have similar, more indirect access to valuable information from accesses in your product lines [i.e., intelligence sources].” Koza made it clear that it was an informal request at this juncture, but added, “I suspect that you’ll be hearing more along these lines in formal channels.”

An *Observer* journalist managed to get Koza’s office line through the NSA main switchboard. When he asked to talk to Koza about the surveillance of diplomatic missions at the UN the answering secretary replied, “You have reached the wrong number.”

In 1971 Daniel Ellsberg, while working as a Defence Department analyst, was responsible for leaking a secret history of US involvement in Vietnam, which became known as “the Pentagon Papers”. He described the Gun leak as “more timely and potentially more important than the Pentagon Papers.”

Following a token UN investigation, White House spokesman Ari Fleischer and Donald Rumsfeld were both challenged about the spying operation, but said they could not comment on security matters. The bugging of foreign diplomats at the UN is permissible under the US Foreign Intelligence Services Act, but it is a breach of the Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations.

The civil rights organisation, Liberty, has appointed a legal team for Gun which told magistrates at London’s Bow Street court that she is pleading a “defence of necessity.” In a statement issued after her court appearance on November 27 last year, she said, “I have today indicated to the court that I intend to plead not guilty to the charge that I face under the Official Secrets Act. I will defend the charge against me on the basis that my actions were necessary to prevent an illegal war in which thousands of Iraqi civilians and British soldiers would be killed or maimed. No one has suggested (nor could they) that I sought or received any payment. I have only ever followed my conscience. I have been heartened

by the many messages of support and encouragement that I have received from Britain and around the world.”

Barry Hugill, a spokesman for Liberty, told the *World Socialist Web Site* that Gun would argue that “faced with the American government asking the British government to commit an illegal act,” she felt no other option than to make public what was going on behind the scenes. Unlike a normal job, employees at GCHQ are bound by the Official Secrets Act (OSA). Gun could not simply report to her superiors because they would have known full well what was happening.

“She will argue that it was her own belief that Britain going to war was itself an illegal act and that America were attempting to unfairly influence the UNSC. By acting in the way she did, albeit if it was in a small way, she felt it could have helped prevent war and therefore save countless lives. So the ‘necessity’ was to prevent an illegal act and to prevent a great human tragedy.”

Gun has since said that the disclosure of the NSA memo “exposed serious illegality and wrongdoing on the part of the US government.” She insists that her actions were intended “to prevent wide-scale death and casualties among ordinary Iraqi people and UK forces in the course of an illegal war.”

The revelations of the spying operation in early March 2003 came at a particularly sensitive time for the British and American governments, as they tried to get support for a second UN resolution authorising war against Iraq. In the face of massive and unprecedented worldwide demonstrations against the threat of war and the intention of major UNSC powers such as France and Germany to vote against a second resolution, the votes of the minor nations were crucial. In the event, the US and UK were forced to go to war on March 21 without a UN mandate.

There was a virtual news blackout of the Gun revelations in the US media. Martin Bright, an *Observer* journalist involved in the Gun case, told the Australian Broadcasting Corporation that interviews planned with major news networks were abandoned at the last minute. Bright said, “It happened with NBC, Fox TV and CNN who appeared very excited about the story to the extent of sending cars to my house to get me into the studio, and at the last minute, were told by their American desks to drop the story.”

While the *New York Times* did not mention the story, other newspapers sought to downplay its significance. The *Washington Post* said, “UN diplomats and analysts said that espionage had been a fact of life at the UN since its founding in 1945, and they assume they are being

monitored by many foreign intelligence agencies.”

The *Los Angeles Times* said, “Forgery or no, some say it’s nothing to get worked up about.”

The February 8 lead in the *Observer* confirms that GCHQ did indeed acquiesce to the US request. Translators and analysts at the government’s top-secret surveillance centre were ordered to cooperate with an American espionage ‘surge’ on Security Council delegations to help smooth the way for a second UN resolution authorising war in Iraq. The information was also intended to aid US Secretary of State Colin Powell’s presentation to the Security Council on February 5 2003.

As well as targeting the “wavering” states, the spying operation is believed to have been directed against at least one permanent member of the UN Security Council, China. Gun was originally hired by GCHQ as a Chinese language specialist. Documents of this level of secrecy are circulated on a strict “need-to-know” basis. Security experts have said that it is highly unlikely that someone as junior as Gun would have seen the memo had she not been expected to use her language expertise in the operation. She is thought to be an expert translator of Mandarin, the language of Chinese officialdom.

Confirmation of British involvement in US directed spying, is potentially very damaging for the British Labour government. The Gun trial may reopen embarrassing questions for the government over the legality of war, as well as demonstrating how far the US and Britain were prepared to go in their ultimately unsuccessful attempts to cajole the UN to support war against Iraq.

A spying operation of this high level would almost certainly have been authorised by the director-general of GCHQ, David Pepper, heavily implicating Foreign Secretary Jack Straw, who has overall responsibility for GCHQ, and suggests the possible involvement of Prime Minister Tony Blair.



To contact the WSW and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact