

Iraq's nuclear-related equipment goes missing under the US occupation

Peter Symonds
19 October 2004

The loss of equipment and material from Iraq's nuclear-related facilities during the US occupation of the country has once again exposed the lies used by the Bush administration as the pretext for its invasion. Not only have US weapons inspectors failed to find any evidence that the Hussein regime had any weapons of mass destruction (WMD), but sophisticated equipment, previously closely monitored by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), has gone missing.

IAEA director-general Mohamed ElBaradei raised his concerns in a letter to the UN Security Council on October 1. Based on satellite photos and other evidence, he pointed to "the widespread and apparently systematic dismantlement" at sites subject to IAEA monitoring. "The imagery shows in many instance the dismantlement of entire buildings that housed high precision equipment (such as flow forming, milling and turning machines; electron beam welders; coordinate measurement machines) formerly monitored and tagged with IAEA seals, as well as the removal of equipment and materials (such as high-strength aluminium) from open storage areas."

The machines were deemed to be "dual use"—that is, one of the possible applications is for the manufacture of nuclear weapons. The IAEA monitoring ensured that such equipment was not used in nuclear programs and that it was not moved or shipped out of the country. Twenty months after the US invasion of Iraq, neither the Bush administration nor its puppet administration in Baghdad can account for the whereabouts of this sensitive equipment. As ElBaradei diplomatically pointed out: "[T]he disappearance of such equipment and materials may be of proliferation significance."

Prior to the invasion, the Bush administration repeatedly claimed that Baghdad not only had WMDs but that there was a danger that the regime would assist

Al Qaeda and other terrorist organisations to obtain these weapons. No link was established, either before or after the invasion of Iraq, between Al Qaeda and Saddam Hussein. Now equipment needed for the manufacture of nuclear weapons is missing and may have found its way onto the international black market where anyone, including Al Qaeda, could purchase it. And Bush, not Saddam Hussein, is directly responsible.

When ElBaradei's letter was made public last week, US, British and Iraqi officials immediately sought to downplay the significance of the missing items. British Foreign Secretary Jack Straw claimed last Tuesday that the equipment was taken shortly after the March 2003 invasion—that is amid the wave of widespread looting following the fall of Hussein. US State Department spokesman Richard Boucher sounded a similar note, adding that "through a variety of efforts that we and the Iraqis have been making, it has been brought under control."

Iraq's interim science and technology minister Rashad Omar reassured the media that all of the sites in question had been brought under control at least since the so-called handover of sovereignty in June. "The locations under my control are very well protected. Not even a single screw is being taken away without my knowledge," he boasted.

However, IAEA spokesman Mark Gwozdecky said that the looting had been going on "for more than a year". The IAEA first became concerned last December when a steel vessel contaminated with uranium turned up in a Rotterdam scrapyard. The shipment was traced back to Iraq via Jordan. Other nuclear-related Iraqi material turned up in Turkey.

Unnamed diplomats close to the IAEA told the media that what was involved was not random looting but a planned operation by people who knew what they were

doing. “We’re talking about dozens of sites being dismantled. Large numbers of buildings taken down, warehouses were emptied and removed. This would require heavy machinery, demolition equipment. This is not something that you’d do overnight,” one source said.

Another diplomat explained that the process took place throughout 2003 and into early 2004. The sites stripped included a precision manufacturing site at Umm Al Marik, an engineering facility at Badr and a site connected with Iraq’s previous nuclear program at Al Qa Qaa. Dozens of others gradually disappeared from satellite photographs analysed by the IAEA.

According to ElBaradei, by December 1998 when IAEA inspectors left Iraq, the country’s nuclear program had been “neutralised”. When they returned in November 2002, they found no evidence that the Hussein regime had attempted to revive any nuclear weapons program. When the inspectors were evacuated in March, just prior to the US-led invasion, IAEA was confident none of the dual-use equipment in Iraq was being used in any unauthorised way.

After the fall of the Hussein regime, the Bush administration effectively blocked the return of any UN weapons inspectors, including those from the IAEA, and handed over the hunt for WMDs to CIA-led inspection teams. IAEA inspectors have only made two visits to Iraq—in June 2003 to investigate reports of the looting of storage rooms at the main Iraqi nuclear complex at Tuwaitha and again in August 2004 to take an inventory of natural uranium stored nearby.

Speaking to the BBC, IAEA spokesman Gwozdecky raised the possibility that the Americans themselves may have been responsible for dismantling the buildings and removing their contents. He said that there had not been any responses to the IAEA’s requests for clarification. According to a CNN report, Iraqi Interior Ministry adviser Sabah Kadhim, who accused “neighbouring countries” of taking the equipment, also alleged that “lower-level US military officers” had been involved.

Given the scope and duration of the looting operation, it is certainly possible that the US carried it out. The fact that the IAEA was not informed underscores Washington’s contempt for the IAEA and the UN. As Gwozdecky pointed out, the IAEA still has a UN mandate to monitor the country’s nuclear programs and

Iraq still has a responsibility to report regularly to the IAEA on the status of its nuclear facilities. Yet since March 2003, neither the US occupation authority nor the US-installed interim regime has kept the IAEA informed.

Prior to the US invasion, the Bush administration insisted that the UN impose a highly intrusive weapons inspection regime and that Iraq account for every, even minor, discrepancy in its weapons programs. Having seized control of the country, Washington does not regard itself as answerable to the IAEA, the UN or any other international body for actions that may result in sensitive nuclear-related equipment falling into the hands of terrorist groups. This simply confirms that WMDs and “the war on terrorism” were simply the pretext for the US to pursue its economic and strategic goal of controlling Iraq and its oil.

In comments to the media, former chief UN weapons inspector Hans Blix pointed to Washington’s hypocritical stance. “I think what is somewhat scandalous is that it [the equipment] has been sitting there under an occupation. It was sitting there controlled when the inspections were there. But when the occupation comes in, it disappears... All these things were tagged and they were visited by the inspectors, and in comes the United States with 200,000 people on board and occupies the country in order, ostensibly, to take care of weapons of mass destruction, and they lose control and the instruments and the equipment that could be helpful in nuclear production disappears,” he said.

A final point needs to be made. The emergence of this issue just weeks before the US presidential elections is further evidence that there continue to be the sharp tensions between the US and its European rivals. The IAEA letter comes as the Bush administration has had to contend with other reports critical of its justifications for the war. Whatever the IAEA’s reasons for the timing of the letter, there is no doubt that it has proven to be another embarrassment for a White House already under siege.



To contact the WWSW and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact