

Former UN Official: US blocked certification that Iraq had no WMDs in 1990s

Alex Lantier

18 October 2007

In an interview with journalist Andrew Cockburn, former UN official Rolf Ekeus revealed that in 1997, the US acted to prevent UN officials from certifying that Iraq had complied with UN resolutions demanding that it destroy its biological, chemical and nuclear weapons and infrastructure.

Ekeus headed the UN Special Commission (Unscm), which inspected Iraqi weapons facilities from 1991 to 1999. Ekeus told Cockburn that in March 1997, “I was getting close to certifying that Iraq was in compliance with [UN] Resolution 687.” The resolution, adopted in 1991, listed the obligations imposed on Iraq after the US-led Persian Gulf War. It required Iraq to destroy all its chemical and biological weapons and related stocks, all ballistic missiles with a range of over 150 km and to place all its nuclear-usable material in the hands of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA).

Though Ekeus did not say it, the inescapable conclusion is that UN officials knew the US-led hysteria over Iraqi weapons of mass destruction (WMD) was a pack of lies. This information provides further proof of the premeditated and illegal character of the Iraq war.

Cockburn notes that “US officials were fearful that Iraq would be officially certified as weapons-free.” The threat of alleged Iraqi WMD was the main pretext for devastating sanctions against Iraq that were a key element of US Middle East policy throughout the 1990s. These sanctions were, moreover, increasingly controversial inside the US, as their immense toll in Iraqi lives became known to a section of the public.

On the May 12, 1996, CBS News “60 Minutes” broadcast, journalist Leslie Stahl had cited UNICEF estimates that 500,000 child deaths in Iraq were attributable to the UN sanctions and asked then-Secretary of State Madeleine Albright if she thought this price was “worth it.” Albright infamously replied: “I think this is a very hard choice, but the price—we think the price is worth it.”

Washington reacted quickly as it became clear that Unscm might destroy the public pretext for the UN sanctions. On March 26, 1997, Albright gave a speech on

Iraq at Georgetown University in Washington. She admitted that Iraqi WMDs had been largely destroyed: “Iraq’s military threat to its neighbors is greatly diminished. Most of its missiles have been destroyed. Its biological and chemical warfare production facilities have been dismantled. Nuclear materials have been removed.”

Albright insisted, however, that sanctions should continue despite Iraqi disarmament: “We do not agree with the nations who argue that if Iraq complies with its obligations concerning weapons of mass destruction, sanctions should be lifted.” She said that Iraq had to “prove its peaceful intentions,” but that “Saddam Hussein’s intentions will never be peaceful,” adding that “a change in Iraq’s government could lead to a change in US policy.” In short, regime change in Iraq was official US policy as far back as 1997, under President Bill Clinton.

As Albright acknowledged, many governments—including nominal American “allies”—were trying to end UN sanctions against Iraq, as they competed with the US for oil and influence in the Middle East. American rivals in Europe and Asia threatened to freeze the US out of the Iraqi oil market, as Washington had burned its bridges with the Hussein regime. These tensions were compounded by the US insistence on a trade embargo against Iran—another major oil supplier—after the 1979 Iranian Revolution. European and Asian countries were increasingly violating both embargoes.

In an August 1996 interview with the *International Herald Tribune*, the CEO of French oil firm Total, Thierry Desmarest, openly criticized US policy: “What is becoming a bit extravagant is that the United States is alone against everyone.” He defended Total’s investments in oil fields in Iran and Libya, adding that Total was working with the French government to devise countermeasures against American firms, should the US take legal action against Total for breaking US embargoes on Iran and Libya.

In a September 1997 article, “Iraq and Iran Tempt World Energy Industry,” the *New York Times* wrote that these developments made “the American strategy of ‘dual containment’ against Iraq and Iran—in addition to the

pressure exerted against Libya, another energy supplier—appear to be increasingly ineffective.” In a 1998 report, “The Mineral Industry of Iraq-1997,” the US Geological Survey (USGS) wrote that in 1997, “At least 40 international petroleum companies...were actively seeking production-sharing and development contracts with Iraq.”

The report listed France’s Total and Elf Aquitaine with contracts for the Bin Umar, Nahr Umar and Majnoun oil fields; Agip of Italy and Repsol of Spain, negotiating for the Nassiriyah field; Russian companies seeking access to the West Qurna field; Indian companies seeking to develop the Al-Halfaya field; and the China National Petroleum Corporation, which had a production-sharing agreement for the Ahdab field. In the face of UN sanctions, however, these companies did not begin pumping or exporting Iraqi oil.

The USGS concluded: “Iraq ultimately plans to develop its crude oil production capacity to 6 Mbbl/d [6 million barrels per day]. Iraq expects to achieve this goal within 7 years after the UN sanctions are lifted.” Had sanctions been lifted in 1997, such a performance would have made Iraq the world’s fourth oil producer in 2004. Iraq and Iran, both under US embargoes, would have accounted for nearly half of Middle East oil production.

In short, Washington’s Middle East policy risked leaving a decisive portion of world oil production in the hands of its rivals. Should Iran and Iraq have decided to sell their oil in currencies other than the US dollar, this would also have had unpredictable, potentially destabilizing effects on global currency markets. The UN-enforced isolation of Iraq—though increasingly politically and strategically untenable—was the main barrier to such developments.

The Clinton administration therefore stoked an utterly baseless media hysteria around Iraqi WMDs and fixed its Iraq policy around the maintenance of sanctions at all costs and preparations for war. Its goals were firstly to weaken Iraq and keep it ripe for a colonialist takeover, and more broadly to prevent a redistribution of influence in the region that would favor American imperialism’s rivals.

This history shows that the Bush administration’s 2003 invasion of Iraq flowed directly from the Clinton administration’s policy, whose trajectory had been unmistakably towards war. This was confirmed during the 2004 presidential campaign by James Rubin, a former State Department official who advised Democratic candidate John Kerry on national security issues. Rubin said that if Kerry had been president during Bush’s first term, the US would “in all probability” have invaded Iraq by then.

Ekeus resigned from his position as head of Unscm in May 1997. He was replaced by Australian Richard Butler, under whom Unscm would function ever more openly as a tool in an escalating campaign of provocation against Iraq.

Butler demanded the right to carry out surprise inspections of presidential palaces in Iraq—a demand that Hussein, fearing assassination by US agents who had infiltrated Unscm, rejected. Washington seized upon this as a pretext to build up its forces in the Persian Gulf.

On February 17, 1998, President Clinton declared, in a speech to the US Joint Chiefs of Staff, that the US was preparing for military action against Iraq. He asserted that American policy was open-ended war: “Following any strike, we will carefully monitor Iraq’s activities with all the means at our disposal. If [Hussein] seeks to rebuild his weapons of mass destruction, we will be prepared to strike him again.” However, a UN team negotiated a last-minute deal whereby Hussein granted Unscm access to the presidential palace and other sensitive sites, thus averting war.

US officials continued to work with Unscm to coordinate their activities for maximum effect, a fact that had become public by August 1998. At that time, the *Washington Post* revealed that Unscm routinely briefed the CIA on its findings. Scott Ritter, an Unscm inspector who was then advocating attacks on Iraq, also told the *New York Times* that American officials asked Unscm to time inspections to help US war propaganda.

According to Ritter, Unscm was asked to hold off inspections in October 1997 because “there was not enough military power in the region” to attack Iraq. In December 1997, US officials asked Unscm to hold off because “military action over the Christmas holidays was ‘domestically unsustainable’”—i.e., would be opposed by the American people.

After a series of crises over Unscm demands for ever more intrusive inspections, Unscm finally left Iraq after being denied admission to Ba’ath Party headquarters on December 9, 1998. One week later, the Clinton administration ordered the first large-scale air raids on Iraq. Bombings would continue throughout the rest of the Clinton administration and, with varying intensity, until the Bush administration’s 2003 invasion of Iraq.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact