

Britain: Blair caught in lies over Iraqi “WMDs”

By Julie Hyland
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Prime Minister Tony Blair’s fleeting visit to Basra Thursday May 29 was meant to vindicate his decision to defy popular opposition and join the US-led attack on Iraq.

Thursday’s visit was the first by any Western leader to Iraq since US and British forces invaded the country, supposedly in search of its “weapons of mass destruction” (WMDs). Arriving at the port of Umm Qasr in an RAF Hercules C130 plane, Blair addressed 400 British troops in Basra, expressing pride “at the magnificent job” they have done.

“I know there were a lot of disagreements in the country about the wisdom of my decision to order the action,” he continued. “But I can assure you of one thing—there is absolutely no dispute in Britain at all about your professionalism and your courage and your dedication and not just in the way you won the war, which was extraordinary, but the way you are conducting the peace, which is remarkable.”

In truth, the US and UK governments’ plans for “the peace” in Iraq are just as bitterly disputed as were their plans for war.

There could be no victorious “walk about” for the prime minister. Army officers had informed Blair that his visit would have to be tightly controlled and confined to select areas, under immediate military control, as his safety could not be guaranteed elsewhere.

The coalition forces are widely perceived as an army of occupation, not liberation. In the last week alone, at least six US soldiers have been killed and dozens of others wounded in separate guerrilla attacks.

Civil unrest over the US presence is also growing. On Wednesday, May 28, local residents in the town of Hit, 90 miles northwest of Baghdad, rioted in protest over intrusive weapons searches by Iraqi police and US

soldiers. According to Reuters, the town of 155,000 people was in “uproar” as “angry residents surged into the streets, burning police cars and throwing stones and handmade grenades at the Americans.”

A local man told the news agency that the trouble began after police and US troops carried out house-to-house searches, supposedly looking for weapons. “The Iraqi police were very rough with our women,” he said. “They forced their way into houses without knocking, sometimes when women were sleeping.”

Another complained, “Saddam is gone, but we want the occupation to end. The Americans must know they can never come back to town.”

Far from ending, the occupation is being consolidated with the US administration announcing this week that it intends to increase the number of troops deployed in Iraq, as it prepares a military campaign aimed at stamping out such resistance.

If the prospect of British forces becoming embroiled in a bitter and protracted war of suppression were not enough to revive criticisms of Blair’s pro-war strategy, the prime minister has not been helped by US officials, who have called into question the entire basis of the invasion.

US Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld’s admission this week that Iraq may not have had weapons of mass destruction after all, has created a furore in Britain.

In his typically cynical manner, Rumsfeld brushed aside questions over America’s failure to recover such weapons by saying that Iraq may have destroyed them before the war. The search for hidden weapons was continuing, Rumsfeld said, but “it is also possible that they [the Iraqis] decided that they would destroy them prior to a conflict.”

The claim that Saddam Hussein possessed chemical,

biological and nuclear weapons was crucial to US and UK justifications for attacking Iraq. Even on March 18, President George W. Bush was insisting to the world that “Intelligence leaves no doubt that Iraq continues to possess and conceal lethal weapons.”

The US administration may believe it can simply set its previous allegations to one side, but in doing so it risks hanging its most loyal ally out to dry.

For Blair, allegations of Iraqi WMDs were the crucial justification for defying popular opposition to the war and committing British troops alongside the US. On February 15, almost 2 million people took to the streets of London to condemn plans for war—the largest demonstration in British history. Blair himself acknowledged that he was in a small minority in supporting a US-led attack, even turning his isolation into a badge of honour.

To this end, the prime minister became the lead advocate against Iraq over its alleged weapons arsenal. Government departments churned out one document after another, supposedly outlining Iraq’s terrifying capabilities, whilst the prime minister toured Europe lecturing other heads of state on the threat posed to world security by Hussein’s regime.

Blair insisted that military action was necessary immediately against Iraq or the consequences would be catastrophic. One intelligence dossier released in September 2002 and setting out “the assessment of the British government” over WMDs, warned that Saddam Hussein’s regime “could deploy nuclear weapons within 45 minutes.”

Even as late as March 18, 2003, Blair was stridently denouncing the claim that Iraq no longer possessed WMDs. “We are asked to accept Saddam decided to destroy those weapons. I say that such a claim is palpably absurd,” he said.

As Blair was making his appearance in Basra, he was being denounced as a liar in Britain.

Robin Cook, former foreign secretary who resigned from the government over the war, described Rumsfeld’s admission that Iraq may have destroyed its weapons as “breathtaking.” It meant that the prime minister had taken Britain to war on a false basis, Cook said. “That has to be investigated—a [House of Commons] select committee is one way of pursuing it.”

Peter Kilfoyle MP said, “This is absolutely dangerous for Tony Blair. The potential charge is that the House

of Commons has been misled.”

Senior intelligence officers have also entered the row, albeit anonymously, with one informing the BBC that the original version of the dossier released in September was doctored by the government to suit its political ends.

The dossier had been “transformed” a week before it was published on the orders of Downing Street, the official said.

“The classic example was the statement that weapons of mass destruction were ready for use within 45 minutes. That information was not in the original draft. It was included in the dossier against our wishes because it wasn’t reliable,” he told the BBC.

Government efforts to calm the row have so far backfired. Responding to the BBC’s claims, Defence Minister Adam Ingram denied that the UK had gone to war on a false pretext, claiming that the United Nations had also provided “damning” evidence of Iraq’s WMDs.

Almost immediately, Ewen Buchanan, spokesman for leading UN weapons inspector Dr Hans Blix, rejected Ingram’s claim. Blix had “never asserted” that Iraq definitely had illegal weaponry, Buchanan said.

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