

Britain: Blair knew claims on Iraqi WMDs were dubious

By Chris Marsden
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Prime Minister Tony Blair was warned a full two weeks before publication of the September 2002 security dossier on Iraq that the sources of the claim that Iraq could launch weapons of mass destruction within 45-minutes, and that it continued to produce chemical and biological weapons at all, were of dubious provenance.

It has now been confirmed that in a personal meeting with Blair, the head of MI6, Sir Richard Dearlove, had admitted one of the key sources on Saddam's chemical weapons was "on trial." He told the prime minister "the source remains unproven." Yet two weeks later Blair declared in the foreword of the intelligence dossier that the intelligence on Iraqi chemical weapons was "beyond doubt."

The latest revelation comes after questions were raised by the publication of the report by Lord Butler meant to review intelligence on Iraq and weapons of mass destruction. One passage of the report states:

"We have been informed by SIS [Special Intelligence Service—MI6] that the validity of the intelligence report on which the 45-minute claim was based has come into question. Post-war source validation by SIS ... has thrown doubt on the reliability of one of the links in the reporting chain affecting this intelligence."

Butler states generally that validation of "human intelligence sources after the war has thrown doubt on a high proportion of those sources and of their reports."

Specifically he then acknowledges:

"Reporting from a sub-source to a second SIS main source that was important to JIC [Joint Intelligence Committee] assessments on Iraqi possession of chemical and biological weapons [i.e., the September dossier] must be open to doubt."

"Reports from a third SIS main source have been withdrawn as unreliable."

"Reports received from a liaison service on Iraqi production of biological agents was seriously flawed, so that the grounds for JIC assessments drawing on those reports that Iraq had recently-produced stocks of biological agents no longer exists."

MI6 withdrew two documents on Iraq's "active, current production" of chemical and biological agents because the "sourcing chain had by then been discredited."

The report concludes that information provided by the middleman who passed on the 45-minute claim, as well as the information from another source about Iraq's banned weapons production, "must now be treated as unsafe."

The notion that it was only after the end of the war that the reliability of the source of the 45-minute claim and other sources was thrown into question is yet another lie.

Whitehall officials said yesterday that the source cited by Butler did indeed make the claim that Iraqi forces could deploy chemical and biological weapons within 45 minutes. But officials also insisted that all MI6 intelligence reports on Iraqi weapons had carried caveats warning that care had to be taken with them and that Blair and other top government figures had been made aware of these caveats.

And Butler's report itself notes that on September 12, 2002—i.e., before the dossier's publication on September 24—Dearlove had "briefed the prime minister on each of [MI6's] main sources."

Sources within MI6 are clearly attempting to cover their own backs and ensure that Blair and the government carry the can for the lies used to justify war with Iraq. MI6 even chose the very week in which the Butler report was to be published to take the rare step of "withdrawing" intelligence about Iraq's WMD.

John Ware, who was compiling a programme anticipating the Butler report for the BBC's *Panorama* that was broadcast just three days before Butler issued his findings, was told by SIS sources that key intelligence on Iraq's weapons of mass destruction had recently been withdrawn.

In that same programme, Dr. Brian Jones, formerly of the Defence Intelligence Staff (DIS), and John Morrison, former deputy chief of the DIS, had both made scathing criticisms of the way Blair had presented evidence of Iraqi WMDs as being far more definite and extensive than it was.

In reality, MI6 worked with the government in both spreading the dubious claims of its sources and then making every effort to conceal their subsequent exposure as lies.

Dearlove gave evidence to the inquiry by Lord Hutton into the death of weapons inspector Dr. David Kelly, during which he described the 45-minute claim as coming from an "established and reliable source quoting a senior Iraqi military officer who was certainly in a position to know this information."

The Hutton Inquiry was not told that the reliability of the intelligence on which the 45-minute claim was in doubt when Dearlove and others testified in August last year, even though MI6 had withdrawn the reports a month earlier.

The reliability of the intelligence on the 45-minute claim was central to the Hutton Inquiry, because Kelly was the source of a BBC *Today* programme accusing the government of "sexing up" the September dossier by including the claim. The government's efforts to rubbish the BBC's report had led to the exposure of Kelly as a whistle bower—which prompted him to apparently take his own life.

When questioned by the Hutton Inquiry, Dearlove even rejected the term "45-minute claim," stating, "I would prefer to refer to it as a piece of well-sourced intelligence."

For his part, John Scarlett, then head of the JIC and the nominal "author" of the September dossier, insisted that it reflected fully and accurately "the intelligence picture on the basis of the intelligence we had at the time."

MI6 sources are still maintaining that the veracity of its source on the 45-minute claim had not been fully investigated and rejected until after Dearlove had given

his evidence to the Hutton Inquiry last September. But this is a transparent evasion. The intelligence could have been "withdrawn"—an admission that it was wrong—at any time over the past 13 months.

And Blair himself has been caught out repeatedly over precisely what he knew about the 45-minute claim.

The intelligence source was publicly discredited as early as December 7, 2003, when Britain's *Sunday Telegraph* featured an interview with Iraqi Lieutenant Colonel al-Dabbagh claiming to be the originator of the intelligence that Saddam Hussein had deployed "weapons of mass destruction" that could be used against coalition troops in less than 45 minutes.

The January 12, 2004, edition of *Newsweek* and the January 27, 2004, editions of the *Guardian* then carried comments based on admissions by the Iraqi National Accord (INA)—an anti-Saddam group backed by MI6 and the CIA—that al-Dabbagh was their man and that the intelligence was false. INA leader Iyad Alawi stated that the claim now "looks like it could have been a crock of s—t."

On February 3, 2004, during a debate on the Hutton Inquiry report, Blair told parliament he was unaware that the 45-minute claim referred only to battlefield weapons, rather than the "long-range missiles" cited in the March 18, 2003 parliamentary motion moved by the prime minister committing Britain to war. This is despite the fact that Dearlove, Scarlett and Defence Secretary Geoff Hoon had all admitted to Hutton that they were aware that the claim referred to battlefield weapons.

Now it has emerged that Blair was personally briefed by Dearlove regarding the dubious character of the source of the 45-minute claim and other intelligence sources.

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