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## Intelligence officials warned that Iraq WMD information was iffy

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WASHINGTON — Dubious intelligence about Iraq's biological weapons programs found its way into the Bush administration's case for a pre-emptive invasion of Iraq despite the fact that officials warned in May 2002 that some of the information might be unreliable or fabricated.

The charge that Iraq had mobile biological warfare research laboratories came solely from a defector provided to U.S. intelligence officials by Iraqi exile leader Ahmad Chalabi, said senior U.S. officials, revealing the oversight for the first time on Thursday. The officials, some of whom are critics of Chalabi, spoke on the condition of anonymity because the intelligence remains classified.

Chalabi, the head of the Iraqi National Congress, is a favorite of pro-war civilian officials in the Pentagon but is deeply distrusted by many rank-and-file professionals in the CIA, the Defense Intelligence Agency and the State Department, who worried that some of the defectors they produced might be Iraqi double agents.

The Defense Intelligence Agency, which debriefed the defector, flagged the information he provided as questionable in 2002. Top DIA officials helped draft an October 2002 National Intelligence Estimate, or NIE, on Iraq's weapons programs and reviewed Secretary of State Colin Powell's February 2003 speech to the U.N. Security Council but never raised their own agency's doubts about the source, said two senior officials.

"It was never made clear to us that" the information was dubious, said a senior State Department official.

A DIA spokesman didn't return a telephone call for comment.

The snafu, said another senior official, also a critic of Chalabi, raises the possibility that Chalabi and others, possibly including Saddam Hussein's own intelligence service, may have tried to deceive the United States about the state of Iraq's nuclear, chemical and biological weapons programs.

The Iraqis, the official said, may have tried to deter a U.S.-led attack by making it appear that they were ready to use chemical and biological weapons. Meanwhile, Chalabi and others may have tried to encourage a U.S.-led attack by making it appear that Iraq was an imminent threat to American interests.

Francis Brooke, a spokesman for Chalabi in Washington, said he was unable to comment because he was unaware of the specific defectors.

Director of Central Intelligence George Tenet referred directly to the issue in his Georgetown University speech on Thursday.

"We recently discovered that relevant analysts in the (intelligence) community missed a notice that identified a source we had cited as providing information that, in some cases was unreliable, and in other cases, was fabricated," he said without elaborating.

A CIA spokesman declined further comment.

The senior U.S. officials said questions arose in mid-2002 about the veracity of the defector who provided the information about alleged mobile biological research laboratories.

They didn't identify the individual, but Powell told the U.N. Security Council that he was an Iraqi major.

The DIA had the man undergo a polygraph examination, which he passed, according to the senior officials.

Even so, the DIA sent the "fabrication notice" to other intelligence agencies, warning that the defector might have been trained to dupe a polygraph and that his information should be considered unreliable.

"There were still questions about whether he was being honest or truthful," said one official. "A notice went out that maybe he was fabricating."

The matter was among a number of problems uncovered by an internal CIA review of Iraq intelligence led by Richard Kerr, a former deputy agency director, that was ordered by Tenet.

The Kerr review is one of at least six inquiries that have been conducted or are underway into the failure to date of U.S. arms inspectors in Iraq to uncover the alleged stockpiles of chemical and biological weapons on which President Bush built his main justification for the March U.S.-led invasion.

A senior administration official said Tenet informed Powell of the oversight after it was noted in the Kerr inquiry.

Bush is to order a seventh probe, this one by an independent bipartisan commission.

In his speech Thursday defending the CIA's handling of intelligence on Iraq, Tenet revealed that the Kerr inquiry had uncovered serious problems with pre-war information on Iraq's biological weapons program.

"We are finding discrepancies in some claims made by human sources about mobile biological weapons production before the war," he said, without elaborating.

The senior officials said the questionable information concerned truck- and rail-mounted biological warfare agent production facilities, as well as the alleged mobile biological research laboratories.

They said some of the sources of the information were defectors provided by Chalabi, who's now a member of the Iraqi Governing Council, the U.S.-installed body helping to administer Iraq until the July 1 handover of power to an interim government.

In general, the only involvement that Chalabi's Iraqi National Congress had with defectors from Saddam's regime was to "verify their identities to the best of our knowledge" and then pass the individuals on to U.S. intelligence officials, said INC spokesman Francis Brooke.

Chalabi, a former businessman, spent years lobbying in Washington for a U.S.-led ouster of the Iraqi dictator.

Chalabi, who was a guest of first lady Laura Bush during her husband's State of the Union speech last month, forged close ties with officials inside and outside the administration who were among the most ardent proponents of invading Iraq. They included Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz and Richard Perle, the former chairman of the Defense Policy Board, an advisory group.

The issue of Iraq's alleged mobile biological warfare research laboratories and production units is at the center of the firestorm over intelligence on Iraq.

The NIE and Powell's speech dwelled at length on the defectors' descriptions of the production units and contained brief references to the alleged research laboratories.

After the war, two truck trailers containing equipment matching the descriptions of the alleged biological agent production units were turned over to U.S. troops.

A CIA report in May declared the trailers to be "the strongest evidence to date that Iraq was hiding a biological warfare program." But Tenet on Thursday revised that conclusion, saying that the purpose of the trailers is in dispute.

Former chief U.S. weapons inspector David Kay, who first agreed with the CIA's initial finding, last week said that he believed the trailers were for producing hydrogen for weather balloons.

On Jan. 22, Vice President Dick Cheney told National Public Radio that the trailers were "conclusive evidence" that Iraq had banned weapons programs.

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