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THREATS AND RESPONSES: INTELLIGENCE; Rumsfeld Says U.S. Has 'Bulletproof' Evidence of Iraq's Links to Al Qaeda

By ERIC SCHMITT

Defense Secretary Donald H. Rumsfeld said today that American intelligence had "bulletproof" evidence of links between Al Qaeda and the government of President Saddam Hussein of Iraq.

Mr. Rumsfeld said that recently declassified intelligence reports about suspected ties between Al Qaeda and the Iraqi government, including the presence of senior members of Al Qaeda in Baghdad in "recent periods," were "factual" and "exactly accurate."

His comments today were the latest in a string of statements this week by senior administration officials -- including Condoleezza Rice, President Bush's national security adviser, and Ari Fleischer, the White House spokesman -- that seemed to raise the prospects of new proof linking Al Qaeda and Iraq.

But in each case, the officials have offered no details to back up the assertions. Mr. Rumsfeld said today that doing so would jeopardize the lives of spies and dry up sources of other information. He also acknowledged that the information he described was probably not strong enough to hold up in an American court.

"If our quest is for proof positive, we probably will be left somewhat unfulfilled," Mr. Rumsfeld said at a Chamber of Commerce luncheon here. "We're not going to have everything beyond a reasonable doubt."

The statements this week by senior administration officials have reopened a debate over the extent to which Iraq has ties to Al Qaeda. The administration had set aside serious efforts to prove this link in favor of a strategy that focused on what it contends is the threat from Iraq posed by weapons of mass destruction.

Administration officials say there is still no evidence to link Mr. Hussein directly to the attacks on Sept. 11 in the United States. Some intelligence and law enforcement officials said today, in addition, that there was little new in what Mr. Rumsfeld and others were describing.

But the new statements of suspected links between Al Qaeda and Iraq happen to come at a time when the administration is trying to muster support both on Capitol Hill and at the United Nations for a resolution backing military action against Iraq, should Mr. Bush chose that path.

Mr. Bush on Wednesday talked about the danger "that Al Qaeda becomes an extension of Saddam's madness."

On Wednesday night, Ms. Rice said that "there are some Al Qaeda personnel who found refuge in Baghdad" after the American air campaign in Afghanistan began last October. She also said high-ranking prisoners at the United States Naval Station in Guantánamo Bay, Cuba, had told investigators that Iraq had provided some training to Al Qaeda in developing chemical weapons.

On Thursday, Mr. Rumsfeld said that contacts between Al Qaeda and Iraq had increased since 1998. "We do have solid evidence of the presence in Iraq of Al Qaeda members, including some that have been in Baghdad," he said. "We have what we consider to be very reliable reporting of senior-level contacts going back a decade, and of possible chemical- and biological-agent training."

But Mr. Rumsfeld added that the report of training in chemical and biological agents came from only one source. Other intelligence supports that report, but comes from less-reliable sources, officials said.

Even as Mr. Rumsfeld appeared to be offering new proof, Secretary of State Colin L. Powell met significant skepticism on Thursday from members of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee.

"To say, 'Yes, I know there is evidence there, but I don't want to tell you any more about it,' that does not encourage any of us," said Senator Chuck Hagel, a Nebraska Republican. "Nor does it give the American public a heck of a lot of faith that, in fact, what anyone is saying is true."

Secretary Powell said that there were confirmed "linkages" between Al Qaeda and Iraq, but that "perhaps part of the confusion is that we're learning more over time as we get access to more and more" Al Qaeda prisoners and Iraqi defectors.

Mr. Rumsfeld explained today that he had met with his deputy, Paul D. Wolfowitz, and other top aides about a week ago, to figure out a way to declassify some of the information about Iraq-Al Qaeda links. He said intelligence analysts came back with "five or six sentences" that were "bulletproof" and could be cited in briefings with allies, lawmakers and the public.

"But they're not photographs," Mr. Rumsfeld said today. "They're not beyond a reasonable doubt. They, in some cases, are assessments from limited number of sources."

In a day here that included interviews with four Atlanta television stations, a meeting with the editorial board of The Atlanta Journal-Constitution and the luncheon address, Mr. Rumsfeld also said that the United States did not have to capture Mr. Hussein to carry out its goal to change regimes in Iraq.

Asked by reporters how American officials could be sure of ousting Mr. Hussein, given intelligence reports that he uses several doubles to confuse possible assassins, Mr. Rumsfeld said the administration's goal was to ensure that the Iraqi leader was no longer was in power.

"If he's on the run, he's not governing Iraq," Mr. Rumsfeld said.

He compared such a scenario to that in Afghanistan, where the ousted Taliban leader, Mullah Muhammad Omar, remains at large, but no longer controls the country.

Photo: Defense Secretary Donald H. Rumsfeld said yesterday that any ties between Iraq and Al Qaeda could not be proved "beyond a reasonable doubt." (Associated Press)