

February 13, 2004

THE STRUGGLE FOR IRAQ: INTELLIGENCE; Stung by Exiles' Role, C.I.A. Orders a Shift in Procedures

By DOUGLAS JEHL

American intelligence officials who before the war were sifting through claims that Iraq had illicit weapons were generally not told that much of the information came from defectors linked to exile organizations that were promoting an American invasion, according to senior United States intelligence officials.

The claims, which have largely proved to be unsubstantiated, included those from a defector who was identified as early as May 2002 as a fabricator by the Defense Intelligence Agency. Nevertheless, reports based on his debriefings arranged by the Iraqi National Congress found their way into documents and speeches used by the Bush administration to justify the war.

The nondisclosure of the source's connection to an exile organization was "standard practice" under the procedures in place at the time, intelligence officials said on Thursday. But that episode and others have prompted the Central Intelligence Agency to order a major change in its procedures. Operations officers will now be required to tell analysts more about sources' identities and possible motivations.

"Barriers to sharing information must be removed," Jami Miscik, the C.I.A.'s deputy director for intelligence, said in an address to analysts on Wednesday. The change is the most significant to emerge from what the director of central intelligence, George J. Tenet, acknowledged last week to have been apparent misjudgments in prewar intelligence about Iraq.

The shift in policy and the content of Ms. Miscik's address were first reported Thursday by The Washington Post.

The fact that the undisclosed information about sources included not just names and titles, but even their links to exile organizations, was described on Thursday by senior intelligence officials who spoke on condition of anonymity.

Mr. Tenet has ordered his subordinates to put in place "a permanent and lasting solution" to the problem within 30 days, Ms. Miscik said in the address, the text of which was provided by intelligence officials.

Ms. Miscik also said that an internal review of the way the C.I.A. had handled prewar intelligence on Iraq had found "cases in which a single source has different source descriptions, increasing the potential for an analyst to believe they have a corroborating source." She said the review had also uncovered cases in which a source was identified as reliable when the information had in fact come from "a subsource about whom we know little."

"Analysts can no longer be put in a position of making a judgment on a critical issue without making a full and comprehensive understanding of the source's access to the information on which they are reporting," Ms. Miscik said in the speech, a copy of which was provided by intelligence officials.

Ms. Miscik also said that the "single most important aspect of our tradecraft that needs to be examined" was whether the intelligence analysts were doing enough to question old assumptions. "Quite simply," she said, "we need to take a hard look at what we assume to be true."

So deeply held was the view that Iraq possessed illicit weapons -- within the intelligence community and beyond -- that it took American interrogators several months to concede that Iraqi prisoners who repeatedly

said Iraq did not have such arsenals might be telling the truth, current and former intelligence officials said in recent interviews.

"They denied that there were weapons, and so we polygraphed them," a senior intelligence official said. "And even when they passed, our first response was to say, wow, they really are good at deception."

As early as May of last year, the month that major combat operations ceased, senior Iraqi officials and scientists in American custody were uniformly denying knowledge of any chemical or biological weapons production or reconstituted nuclear program, senior intelligence officials said. But the administration gave its first public hint that the suspected weapons stockpiles might not exist only in October, in an interim report by David A. Kay.

The burden of the C.I.A. plan to disclose more information about intelligence sources will fall on the agency's directorate of operations, which handles human intelligence, government officials said. The intelligence directorate, which is headed by Ms. Miscik, focuses on analysis, and has historically been prevented from learning much about the identity of intelligence sources.

"When it comes to foreign intelligence, there should be no such thing as D.I. and D.O. information; it is agency information," Ms. Miscik said. "We are not brushing aside the agency's duty to protect sources and methods, but barriers to sharing information must be removed."

A senior intelligence official said that the "whole intelligence community is undergoing a look" at how information about sources should be shared. But Mr. Tenet's decision affects only the C.I.A., not the 14 other intelligence agencies he oversees, government officials said.

That means it will not apply to the Defense Intelligence Agency, whose reports -- based on the debriefing of the inadequately identified defector -- the administration cited as evidence that Iraq possessed stockpiles of chemical weapons.

The episode was first described in general terms by Mr. Tenet in a speech last week.

In providing the most detailed account to date, senior intelligence officials said the defector, a military official, had been introduced to the Defense Intelligence Agency's human intelligence service in early 2002, as part of a standing arrangement with the Iraqi National Congress. That group, headed by Ahmad Chalabi, had built close ties to the Pentagon and the office of Vice President Dick Cheney.

The defector was debriefed in a "third country" -- not Iraq or the United States -- resulting in two intelligence reports in which the information he provided was described as credible, the officials said. In keeping with standard practice, they said, those reports and others involving defectors introduced by the Iraqi National Congress made no mention of links to the organization, even though it was openly promoting an American-led invasion of Iraq.

During follow-up interviews, however, the Defense Intelligence Agency officers detected inconsistencies in the defector's account and concluded that he had been "coached by the I.N.C." to provide information about Iraq's illicit weapons program, one official said. That prompted the intelligence agency to issue a "fabrication notification" in May of 2002, instructing other intelligence agencies to disregard the defector's information as unreliable.

But in what Mr. Tenet has described as a mistake, the warning was never linked electronically to the earlier reports. The defectors' claims were thus included in both the National Intelligence Estimate of October 2002 and the presentation last February to the United Nations Security Council by Secretary of State Colin L. Powell.