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Fake Iraq documents 'embarrassing' for U.S.

From David Ensor
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WASHINGTON (CNN) --Intelligence documents that U.S. and British governments said were strong evidence that Iraq was developing nuclear weapons have been dismissed as forgeries by U.N. weapons inspectors.

The documents, given to International Atomic Energy Agency Director General Mohamed ElBaradei, indicated that Iraq might have tried to buy 500 tons of uranium from Niger, but the agency said they were "obvious" fakes.

U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell referred to the documents directly in his presentation to the U.N. Security Council outlining the Bush administration's case against Iraq.

"I'm sure the FBI and CIA must be mortified by this because it is extremely embarrassing to them," former CIA official Ray Close said.

Responding to questions about the documents from lawmakers, Powell said, "It was provided in good faith to the inspectors and our agency received it in good faith, not participating ... in any way in any falsification activities."

"It was the information that we had. We provided it. If that information is inaccurate, fine," Powell said on NBC's "Meet the Press" last Sunday.

"We don't believe that all the issues surrounding nuclear weapons have been resolved [in Iraq]," he said.

How were forgeries missed?

But the discovery raises questions such as why the apparent forgeries were given to inspectors and why U.S. and British intelligence agents did not recognize that they were not authentic.

Sources said that one of the documents was a letter discussing the uranium deal supposedly signed by Niger President Tandja Mamadou. The sources described the signature as "childlike" and said that it clearly was not Mamadou's.

Another, written on paper from a 1980s military government in Niger, bears the date of October 2000 and the signature of a man who by then had not been foreign minister of Niger in 14 years, sources said.

"The IAEA has concluded, with the concurrence of outside experts that these documents -- which formed the basis for the reports of recent uranium transactions between Iraq and Niger -- are not in fact authentic," ElBaradei said in his March 7 presentation to the U.N. Security Council.

Close said the CIA should have known better.

"They have tremendously sophisticated and experienced people in their technical services division, who wouldn't allow a forgery like this to get by," Close said. "I mean it's just mystifying to me. I can't understand it."

A U.S. intelligence official said that the documents were passed on to the International Atomic Energy Agency within days of being received with the comment, "We don't know the provenance of this information, but here it is."

If a mistake was made, a U.S. official suggested, it was more likely due to incompetence not malice.

"That's a convenient explanation, but it doesn't satisfy me," Close said. "Incompetence I have not seen in those agencies. I've seen plenty of malice, but I've never seen incompetence."

Who made the forgeries?

But the question remains -- who is responsible for the apparent forgeries?

Experts said the suspects include the intelligence services of Iraq's neighbors, other pro-war nations, Iraqi opposition groups or simply con men.

Most rule out the United States, Great Britain or Israel because they said those countries' intelligence services would have been able to make much more convincing forgeries if they had chosen to do so.

President Bush even highlighted the documents in his State of the Union address on January 28.

"The British government has learned that Saddam Hussein recently sought significant quantities of uranium from Africa," Bush said.

U.S. officials said that the assertion by the president and British government was also based on additional evidence of Iraqi efforts to obtain uranium from another African country. But officials would not say which nation and a knowledgeable U.S. official said that there was not much to that evidence either.

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