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Agency Disavows Report on Iraq Arms

by Joseph Curl

The International Atomic Energy Agency says that a report cited by President Bush as evidence that Iraq in 1998 was "six months away" from developing a nuclear weapon does not exist.

"There's never been a report like that issued from this agency," Mark Gwozdecky, the IAEA's chief spokesman, said yesterday in a telephone interview from the agency's headquarters in Vienna, Austria.

"We've never put a time frame on how long it might take Iraq to construct a nuclear weapon in 1998," said the spokesman of the agency charged with assessing Iraq's nuclear capability for the United Nations.

In a Sept. 7 news conference with British Prime Minister Tony Blair, Mr. Bush said: "I would remind you that when the inspectors first went into Iraq and were denied — finally denied access [in 1998], a report came out of the Atomic — the IAEA that they were six months away from developing a weapon.

"I don't know what more evidence we need," said the president, defending his administration's case that Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein was building weapons of mass destruction.

The White House says Mr. Bush was referring to an earlier IAEA report.

"He's referring to 1991 there," said Deputy Press Secretary Scott McClellan. "In '91, there was a report saying that after the war they found out they were about six months away."

Mr. Gwozdecky said no such report was ever issued by the IAEA in 1991.

Many news agencies — including The Washington Times — reported Mr. Bush's Sept. 7 comments as referring to a 1998 IAEA report. The White House did not ask for a correction from The Times.

To clear up the confusion, Mr. McClellan cited two news articles from 1991 — a July 16 story in the London Times by Michael Evans and a July 18 story in the New York Times by Paul Lewis. But neither article cites an IAEA report on Iraq's nuclear-weapons program or states that Saddam was only six months away from "developing a weapon" — as claimed by Mr. Bush.

The article by Mr. Evans says: "Jay Davis, an American expert working for the U.N. special commission charged with removing Iraq's nuclear capability, said Iraq was only six months away from the large-scale production of enriched uranium at two plants inspected by UN officials."

The Lewis article said Iraq in 1991 had a uranium "enrichment plant using electromagnetic technology [that] was about six months from becoming operational."

In October 1998, just before Saddam kicked U.N. weapons inspectors out of Iraq, the IAEA laid out a case opposite of Mr. Bush's Sept. 7 declaration.

"There are no indications that there remains in Iraq any physical capability for the production of weapon-usable nuclear material of any practical significance," IAEA Director-General Mohammed ElBaradei wrote in a report to U.N. Secretary-General Kofi Annan.

Mr. Bush and Mr. Blair on Sept. 7 cited an agency "report" declaring that satellite photography revealed the Iraqis had undertaken new construction at several nuclear-related sites. This week, the IAEA said no such report existed.

The IAEA also took issue with a Sept. 9 report by the International Institute for Strategic Studies — cited by the Bush administration — that concludes Saddam "could build a nuclear bomb within months if he were able to obtain fissile material."

"There is no evidence in our view that can be substantiated on Iraq's nuclear-weapons program. If anybody tells you they know the nuclear situation in Iraq right now, in the absence of four years of inspections, I would say that they're misleading you because there isn't solid evidence out there," Mr. Gwozdecky said.

"I don't know where they have determined that Iraq has retained this much weaponization capability because when we left in December '98 we had concluded that we had neutralized their nuclear-weapons program. We had confiscated their fissile material. We had destroyed all their key buildings and equipment," he said.

Mr. Gwozdecky said there is no evidence about Saddam's nuclear capability right now — either through his organization, other agencies or any government.