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WEAPONS OF MASS DESTRUCTION

SUSAN WATTS

INTRO (KIRSTY WARK)

Good evening. Tony Blair is flying back from the Evian summit into heavy turbulence. His angry denial of Clare Short's allegation that the public was duped over the question of WMP has not reduced the temperature. Robin Cook has called for an independent enquiry. Seventy three MPs including fifty Labour back benchers have signed a motion deploring the failure of the coalition to find any weapons of mass destruction and the Opposition is threatening to drop it's support for the government. Now we've spoken to a senior figure, intimately involved in the drawing up of the Blair weapons dossier, who says the intelligence community was uneasy at the way some of its information was handled. Here's Susan Watts.

CLARE SHORT

But they weren't saying there was a link to Al Qaida and they weren't saying it was weaponised and threatening us in forty five minutes, that's where the spin came in.

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ROBIN COOK

It is beginning to look as if the government's committed a monumental blunder.

SW Over the weekend the storm over the missing weapons of mass destruction focused down on one key point: was the British public duped over the urgency of dealing with Iraq's banned weapons? The government's claim that Saddam could mobilise these within forty five minutes is already looking shaky, but on the Today programme this morning the Foreign Secretary, Jack Straw, suggested it had never been a key part of the argument.

JACK STRAW

If you look at for example the key speech that the Prime Minister made on the 18th of March before the House of Commons, from my quick re-reading of it this morning, I can for example find no reference to this now famous forty five minutes.

SW But the reference to forty five minutes was there in the Prime Minister's speech to the Commons on the day he published his famous weapons dossier.

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TONY BLAIR

It concludes that Iraq has chemical and biological weapons, that Saddam has continued to produce them, that he has existing and active military plans for the use of chemical and biological weapons, which could be activated within forty five minutes including against his own Shia population.

SW And it features in the dossier itself four times, notably in the Prime Minister's forward and the executive summary.

SW Today, at the GH summit in Evian, Tony Blair once again found himself in rebuttal mode.

TONY BLAIR

The idea that we doctored such intelligence is completely and totally false, every single piece of intelligence that we presented was cleared very properly by the Joint Intelligence Committee.

SW It's a surprising claim to make given that it encompasses the other so called dodgy dossier, part of which was plagiarised, and in any case today Tony Blair appeared irritated that the weapons issue won't go away.

TONY BLAIR

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I think it is important that if people actually have evidence, they produce it, but it is wrong frankly for people to make allegations on the basis of so called anonymous sources when the facts are precisely the facts that we've stated.

SW But in some cases anonymous sources could be the only way to gain an insight into the intelligence world. We've spoken to a senior official intimately involved with the process of pulling together the original September 2002 Blair weapons' dossier. We cannot name this person because their livelihood depends on anonymity. Our source made clear that in the run up to publishing the dossier the government was obsessed with finding intelligence on immediate Iraqi threats and the government's insistence the Iraqi threat was imminent was a Downing Street interpretation of intelligence conclusions. His point is that, while the intelligence community was agreed on the potential Iraqi threat in the future, there was less agreement about the threat the Iraqis posed at that moment. Our source said:

SOURCE

That was the real concern, not so much what they had now but what they would have in the future,

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but that unfortunately was not expressed strongly in the dossier, because that takes away the case for war to a certain extent. But in the end it was just a flurry of activity and it was very difficult to get comments in because people at the top of the ladder didn't want to hear some of the things.

SW Our source talks of a febrile atmosphere in the days of diplomacy leading to the big Commons debate of September last year; of the government seizing on anything useful to the case, including the possibly existence of weapons that could be ready within forty five minutes.

SOURCE

It was a statement that was made and it just got out of all proportion. They were desperate for information, they were pushing hard for information that could be released. That was one that popped up and it was seized on, and it's unfortunate that it was. That's why there is the argument between the intelligence services and Cabinet office number 10, because they picked up on it, and once they've picked up on it you can't pull it back from them.

SW And again, specifically on the forty five minute point:

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SOURCE

It was an interesting week before the dossier was put out because there were so many people saying 'well I'm not so sure about that', or in fact they were happy with it being in, but not expressed the way that it was, because the word-smithing is actually quite important. The intelligence community are a pretty cautious lot on the whole but once you get people presenting it for public consumption then of course they use different words.

SW The problem is that the forty five minutes point was not corroborated. For sceptics it highlights the dangers of relying too heavily on information from defectors. Journalists in America are being accused of running propaganda from the Iraqi National Congress.

RAY MCGOVERN - FORMER CIA ANALYST

All these folks have their own personal agendas, all of them have axes to grind, the most unreliable source are sources that come out of the émigré or defector circles, the more so when you're talking about a fellow like Chalabi. Chalabi has been out of Iraq since the Brooklyn Dodgers have been out of New York City and that's a long time indeed.

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SW Back in February, Colin Powell talked of the existence of mobile weapons labs. Material from defectors is behind the confident insistence by politicians on both sides of the Atlantic that they've now found them. But our source, who is in an excellent position to know and spoke of being ninety percent confident these claims were correct on the day the Pentagon showed the trucks to the world, now puts that confidence level at just forty percent. A CIA report last week says the Iraqis claim the trucks were used to produce hydrogen for military weather balloons. But with the war over does all this really matter? Perhaps intelligence service concern about a future threat from weapons of mass destruction was enough to justify military action, but the government's critics say that wasn't the basis on which the British public or MPs were sold the case for war.

MALCOLM SAVIDGE - LABOUR MP

This is extremely grave. Politicians who we have to take seriously have made allegations that Parliament and the people were led to war on false grounds. That is a more serious allegation than anything we've faced in recent times,

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effectively if it were true it could be the Prime Minister's Watergate.

SW Of course overwhelmingly convincing evidence of weapons may turn up tomorrow and former inspectors say documents still being read may be key, but until something compelling is produced the pressure looks unlikely to let up. As for the promised new dossier on weapons evidence, the question will be: is there sufficient trust in our government remaining for the public and MPs to believe whatever it might say?

PRESENTER

Susan Watts. And the voice you heard there in the excerpts was the voice of an actor. Well earlier this evening I spoke to the International Development Secretary, Baroness Amos. I asked her what the immediate threat was which led us to go to war in Iraq.

BARONESS AMOS

Iraq has weapons of mass destruction, weapons of mass destruction which were used against its own people. We know that, there is evidence of that. We have had twelve years of UN Security Council resolutions, which have been broken, and the final report from Dr Blitz, one hundred and seventy three pages made it absolutely clear

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that there were a number of unanswered questions with respect to Iraq's chemical, biological and nuclear weapons programme.

P According to the intelligence community it was agreed as we - someone from the intelligence community has spoken to us - 'it was agreed that the potential Iraqi threat in the future was there but there was much less agreement about the threat it posed. That was the real concern, says our source, not so much what they have now but what they would have in the future, but that unfortunately was not expressed strongly in the dossier because that takes away the case for war to a certain extent.'

BA Well in our view Iraq posed a threat. In the view of the members of the Security Council last November Iraq posed a threat to international peace and security. That is why we had a Security Council resolution passed, it was absolutely clear and I think that time will answer these questions.

P In the dossier it says that Iraq can deploy chemical and biological weapons within forty five minutes. How do you know that is accurate?

BA We knew that on the basis of the evidence available to us at the time.

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P Tony Blair said today that every detail was signed off by the Joint Intelligence Committee. That's not always the case.

BA But in the case of the information in the dossier that was so.

P Which dossier?

BA The dossier that was published.

P The first dossier that was published in September or what about the dossier in February which was then found to have been plagiarised, did they sign off on every detail on that?

BA No the first dossier was signed off, and the second dossier and I think it's really important that people recognise this, that none of the information in the second dossier was actually questioned. What was questioned was the fact that those sources were not acknowledged but the information in the dossier was not questioned.

P Was it signed off by the Joint Intelligence Committee?

BA Well the intelligence information which was contained in that dossier would have been signed off.

P But was the actual dossier itself signed off?

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BA But the dossier contained information that was a mix of intelligence information and information from other sources.

P So it wasn't signed off by the Joint Intelligence Committee?

BA The intelligence information would have been signed off.

P So intelligence information was signed off then but not the general thrust of the dossier?

BA Well the Joint Intelligence Committee is responsible for signing off intelligence information, this is what I've said.

P The problem is, coming back again to our intelligence source, that a statement was made about being able to activate banned weapons in forty five minutes and it just got out of all proportion, they were desperate for information, they were pushing hard for information which could be released. That was one that popped up and it was seized on and it was very unfortunate it was. That's why there's the argument between intelligence service and the Cabinet office number 10 because they picked up on it, once they picked up on it you can't pull back from them. The problem is Baroness Amos, you can't pull back from it but there's absolutely no

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evidence that Saddam Hussein could have launched that operation within forty five minutes because you haven't found it.

BA This is information that was available to us as a government. I think that time will answer these questions. I mean obviously at this point in time in Iraq, sorting out the humanitarian situation, making things better for the lives of ordinary Iraqis is what is most important -

P But what is most important for people is trust and trust in this government.

BA - can I just say, that searching for WMD cannot be the first priority and that is why I say that time will resolve this.

P Baroness Amos, do you agree that trusting your government is very important?

BA Of course I agree that trust in a government is important.

P Do you agree that this government cannot seem to be trustworthy until weapons of mass destruction are shown to exist?

BA No I don't agree with that, because if you look at what the Prime Minister said to Parliament in March when he went through the arguments absolutely clearly, if you look at what Jack Straw said in Parliament many, many times when

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he went through the arguments absolutely clearly, to now pick up on one element of a dossier and say that the British public -

P It's a major element.

BA - can I finish? When I say that to pick up on one aspect of a dossier and say that the British public cannot now trust the British government, I do not agree with. You have to go back and look at everything that we have said and I think that time will resolve this.

P Baroness Amos there and we'll have more for her on the G8 summit a little later. Before that now I'm joined in the studio by the President of the Iraqi National Congress, Dr Ahmed Chalabi. Dr Chalabi first of all, why on earth should we believe that Saddam Hussein had weapons of mass destruction and was ready to use them when we have absolutely no evidence of that?

DR AHMED CHELABI

Saddam had used weapons of mass destruction before and he was developing weapons of mass destruction, so that is a fact that we know.

P But there's been no intelligence from people either within the Iraqi National Congress or outwith the Iraqi National Congress which has taken us any further than this.

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of touch, so would you say that perhaps you're just out of touch on what was capable?

AC No, I was not, I was in Iraq between '92 and '97 fighting Saddam Hussein from the north, so that in itself is a false claim. However, being - we have predicted many things and our record has been excellent, for example we predicted that the Iraqi army will not defend Saddam and they did not.

P But let's deal with this forty five minute capability, there's been a report in the Sunday papers that there was a source that came to you that you then handed over that produced this claim that has not apparently been corroborated anywhere that this mobile or this launch pad could exist within a forty five minute time span.

AC We have never said that, we didn't produce such a source and - I didn't read that report but I understand that it was quoting anonymous people about an anonymous source.

P Are you saying categorically there was no source connected in any way whatsoever with the INC that delivered that information?

AC This is very unlikely that any source connected with INC would have delivered that information

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AC No, we have not looked for weapons of mass destruction simply because the coalition has taken this task entirely on themselves.

P But why haven't they been found?

AC Because they are not looking the right way and there are ways to look for that they have not done.

P And are these ways, ways that you have told them about?

AC I have mentioned that the way to find the weapons is to find the people who are concealing them.

P And do you know who these people are?

AC They were led by Husai (?) Saddam Hussein and Ahred Himood(?) his secretary and the special republican guard officers and those people are - can be found in Iraq now.

P Do you think that the claim in the all important Blair dossier that Saddam Hussein could have launched biological and chemical weapons within forty five minutes was a credible claim?

AC I don't know, because we had nothing to do with that document nor with that dossier.

P You have been accused of being out of Iraq longer than the Brooklyn Dodgers were out of New York City and therefore you were completely out

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because we know the sources we gave and they were not in a position to determine about the operational capability of the weapons.

P Well, why were they of any use then?

AC Because they knew about how the weapons were being made and they knew how the weapons were being stored.

P You say it's very unlikely - you're president and you have kept your finger you would say very much on the pulse - is it or is it not the case that a source close to you gave information, uncorroborated, about the capability of delivering a weapon in forty five minutes?

AC The sources we produced we gave over to the Americans and we've not seen them since. Some sources we produced in December of 2001, they took them and we haven't been able to talk to them. We asked to talk to them but we were not allowed to, so really we don't know what they said in the year and a half that they have been with the Americans. So our sources, from knowing the kind of knowledge they had, I would say that they're unlikely to have said that they can produce, or use chemical or biological weapons in forty five minutes.

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P Do you think you're being sidelined in the post-Iraq strategy?

AC No, we are in Iraq, we are in Baghdad. I just came from Baghdad. I was there three days ago and we are in our country and it's very difficult to sideline us in our country.

P What do you think is your immediately role in your country?

AC My immediate role is to help build civil society and help establish a democracy in Iraq.

P Dr Chalabi, thank you very much indeed. In an accident of international scheduling that must have delighted Jacques Chirac, the first world leaders summit post Iraq was in the French resort of Evian. Ironically, and to the fury of aid agencies, the only real progress at the G8 was in international conflict rather than helping the world's poor. The leaders issued a strong communiqué on weapons of mass destruction, pressuring states like North Korea and Iran, and Russia also announced it's to suspend nuclear exports to Iran. But as David Grossman reports, the ongoing frolic between the US and France seeped into other parts of the G8 agenda.

REMAINDER OF NEWSNIGHT NOT RELEVANT

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END

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