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2: WAR ON TERRORISM: BIOLOGICAL WEAPONS - RUSSIAN MILITARY SUSPECTED AS SOURCE OF ANTHRAX

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Anne Penketh

THE HUNT for the source of the weapons-grade anthrax that shut down the heart of the American political establishment yesterday has already produced many false trails

Much of the focus has been on Iraq, but according to the world's leading germ warfare experts the finger of suspicion points more directly at Russia's broken -down military industrial complex.

If the finger of suspicion falls on any one country "the obvious one is Russia, it's a league ahead of Iraq", said David Kelly, a senior adviser to UN weapons inspectors for Iraq.

Other countries that are thought to be working on a biological weapons programme include Iran, North Korea, Libya, Cuba, Egypt and Pakistan

Unemployed top Russian scientists who helped to run the Soviet Union's illegal and secret germ warfare programme appear to be a likely source of the anthrax outbreak in the United States. It is known that Osama bin Laden's al-Qa'ida network has tried to buy ingredients for weapons of mass destruction in Russia in recent years.

The secret Russian germ warfare programme was set up in the 1970s to allow Moscow to cheat on its treaty commitments to destroy all its anthrax and other germ warfare stocks. Experts believe parts of the programme are still operating today.

Moreover, the scientists who worked on the programme until it was officially disbanded in 1992 may have sold their secrets on the open market. Mr Kelly said that of the 30,000 people who worked for the Soviet agency known as Biopreparat, "between three and four thousand were professional scientists. Some would be available to go elsewhere."

The al-Qa'ida network is known to be awash with funds, thanks to the fundraising activities of Saudi-based charities and Mr bin Laden's personal fortune

The full extent of Russia's cheating was revealed to the CIA by Ken Alibek, the deputy director of Biopreparat, when he defected in 1992.

Mr Alibek has described how the Soviet Union churned out two tons

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of anthrax a day at Stepanagorsk in Kazakhstan and said the Russians covered up an outbreak of anthrax in the Urals in 1979. He told a United States congressional committee last week: "There are pieces of Biopreparat that are still running, some with a very high level of secrecy."

No one knows where up to 50 Russian scientists possessing secrets on weapons-grade anthrax may be today, he added.

The strain found to have affected the 34 staff members of the US Senate yesterday was a highly potent, finely milled weapons-grade powder.

Dick Spertzl, a biowarfare expert in America, said "Any dedicated individual can learn how to make weapons-grade anthrax if they had an adviser, it would be easier"

But turning the laboratory-produced liquid into the powder spores is much harder. "The knowledge of drying is not that common," Mr Spertzl said.

According to the experts, Iraq had concentrated on the liquid variety of anthrax, which could infect its victims via so-called "drop tanks" or aerosols

Only three countries, Iraq, the United States and Russia, have turned anthrax into a weapon. Britain announced in 1956 that it was ending its offensive anthrax programme

The US abandoned its own programme in 1969, and says it is concentrating on biodefence. But Russian scientists at Biopreparat continued to work clandestinely on the secret anthrax weapons.

Iraq is believed to possess at least 8.4 tons of concentrated liquid anthrax, despite telling United Nations weapons inspectors that all stocks had been destroyed in 1991. Ewen Buchanan, the spokesman for the UN inspectors responsible for disarming Iraq, says: "We had concerns that Iraq was attempting to store it as a dry product, but no hard evidence."

Mr Kelly also said that "we know that Iraq went to the British patents office in the dissemination area in the 1980s, or wet dissemination", but he cautioned against assuming that state-sponsored terrorism lay behind the outbreaks.

Three of the 19 hijackers of the 11 September attacks have been linked to Russia's rebellious republic of Chechnya and the ringleader, Mohamed Atta, twice met an Iraqi intelligence agent in Prague. American officials say, though, that such meetings did not prove Iraq's involvement in any terrorist acts

Mr Kelly said Iraq, which has won support from Arab states for its efforts to break out of the 10-year-old UN sanctions, has "too much at stake" to take part in such action

The use of the term "high grade" anthrax could mean that it is either more potent or easier to disseminate. British experts in biowarfare said the term probably means that it is of a genetic strain that is more infectious or that its powdered spores are in a form that is easier to inhale, so causing the most lethal form of anthrax.

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The anthrax mailed to the Florida newspaper belonged to the standard Ames strain, which is not known to be significantly more virulent than others.

Professor Alastair Hay, a biowarfare specialist at Leeds University, said "high grade" anthrax suggests that it might be a strain that is more infectious, with a relatively small number of spores capable of causing a lung infection

It normally takes between 2,500 and 10,000 spores to be inhaled to cause pulmonary anthrax, so a strain that could result in disease with fewer spores would be sought by biowarfare terrorists

The other way of making anthrax more deadly is to grind it into a fine powder that easily floats in the air.

One of the greatest concerns is that anthrax, which is not contagious, may be genetically altered so that it is

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