

Secrets of Saddam's hidden arsenal

Dossier Tony Blair says the document will be published soon. Guardian reporters speculate on its contents

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A dossier on Iraq's nuclear, biological and chemical warfare capabilities was drawn up in March by the Cabinet Office's joint intelligence committee, chaired by the former MI6 officer John Scarlett, after intense discussions within the intelligence community about what should be published and how much speculation it should contain.

Just days before Tony Blair flew to Washington in early April to meet George Bush, the government decided not to publish the dossier.

Though it contained evidence about Baghdad's development of biological weapons — including anthrax and botulinum toxin — the dossier was based on what UN special commission weapons inspectors (Unscm) found up to the point when they were pulled out of Iraq in 1998. Even the CIA admit that intelligence gathered after that date is far from reliable.

Last Monday, a Whitehall source said that the long-awaited dossier "would no longer play a role". There was "very little new to put into it", he said. The following day, Mr Blair announced that a dossier would be published in a matter of weeks.

Sir Michael Quinlan, former permanent secretary at the Ministry of Defence, told BBC Radio 4's Today programme "I frankly think most of us had already assumed that he had retained at least biological and chemical weapons. To that extent I wouldn't think it will produce anything new."

"If it has something to say about intention that obviously would be new but it's very hard to see what that could be."

Biological

UN weapons inspectors found that the Iraqis had weaponised anthrax, botulinum toxin and aflatoxin. The Iraqis admitted hiding their material in caves and in tunnels.

They also carried out research and development work on other agents such as ricin (a highly potent toxin) and animal and plant agents

Iraq has also admitted working on Clostridium perfringens, a bacterial weapon that causes gas gangrene, a condition in which the flesh rots.

Examining Iraqi records, Unscm came to the conclusion that the amounts of anthrax, botulinum, gas gangrene and aflatoxin were much less than the capacity of its germ warfare laboratories. Iraq claimed it had run its weapons labs at less than full production capacity. The inspectors concluded that Iraq still has at least 157 bombs and 25 missile warheads filled with germ agents, although those warheads would have a limited shelf-life.

Baghdad has claimed that one of the products made at its newly rebuilt Fallujah complex, west of Baghdad is castor oil for use in brake fluid. Castor beans can also be used to make ricin.

Chemical

The Iraqis admitted manufacturing agents including the nerve agent sarin and mustard gas. They had weaponised chemicals and had hundreds of tons of mustard agent in missiles, artillery and rockets. Much of this was found and destroyed.

But in its final assessment of the Iraqi chemical programme Unscm said Iraq had failed to account for at least 3.9 tons of VX nerve gas — one of the most deadly nerve agents — as well as 600 tons of ingredients to make it. Iraq said it had destroyed the material after the war but apart from a few fragments of warheads bearing VX traces, no hard evidence of this was found.

Last year August Hanning, the German intelligence chief, claimed that Iraq was developing new chemical weapons and that "German companies apparently delivered important components for the production of poison gas" to an Iraqi weapons plant at Samarra.

In early 2001, the CIA reported that Iraq had rebuilt two chemical plants at Fallujah, which had been used to produce chemical and biological weapons before the Gulf war. Iraq said the plants are being used solely to manufacture pesticides.



Nuclear

Germany's intelligence agency, the BND, which has specialised in tracking of Iraqi purchases of dual-use technology, believes that President Saddam's nuclear weapons programme is still in business. Mr Hanning, said this year "It is our estimate that Iraq will have an atomic bomb in three years".

Gary Milhollin, the head of the Wisconsin Project on Nuclear Arms Control, told Congress last year that he believed Iraq had "all the elements of a workable nuclear weapon except the fissile material needed to fuel it". Most experts believe that President Saddam's lack of weapons-grade uranium or plutonium is the main obstacle to an Iraqi bomb, and that the process of producing it is so laborious that the west could monitor his progress.

The International Atomic Energy Agency reported at the end of 1998 "There were no indications to suggest that Iraq was successful in its attempt to produce nuclear weapons — or to suggest that Iraq had produced more than a few grammes of weapons-grade nuclear material".

But the Iraqi leader could short-circuit this process if he could acquire the material on the international black market, although there is no evidence that he has done so.

President Saddam assembled a substantial team of nuclear weapons scientists before the Gulf war, and the evidence suggests it remains together. The only significant defection was that of a senior engineer, Khidhr Hamza, who shipped out in 1994.

Former inspectors say the Iraqis could be working on warhead components and could even assemble some (if all the non-nuclear components such as electrical firing circuits, the high-quality steel explosive lenses which focus the high explosive to produce the critical force to create nuclear fission) along with the high-grade explosive needed.

In 1999 it emerged that the Iraqi government had imported six "lithotripter" machines (used to shatter kidney stones without surgery), which contain high-precision electronic switches

for a nuclear device. Suspicions were raised further when Iraq ordered 120 extra switches as "spares".

It is unclear whether Baghdad ever got hold of them, but the order was a clear sign that Iraq continues to work on nuclear weapon design.

Missiles

The Iraqis possess the artillery and rockets to deliver chemical weapons and have engineers and scientists still in place to develop and produce more, according to former UN inspectors.

The Iraqi capability of medium range missiles (the Al-Hussein, based on the Russian Scud design) is very limited. Most of the missiles were found and destroyed. These missiles have a range of more than 400 miles and a 500kg payload.

A small number — and a quantity of major components that could be assembled into a missile — may be hidden. In 1998, Unscm believed that Iraq still had nine ballistic Scud type missiles whose whereabouts were unknown. Some analysts say these missiles were probably hidden and Baghdad cannot be sure they will work as they are untested.

Satellite photographs in recent months have shown Iraq's attempts to rebuild many of the weapons and missile factories destroyed in Operation Desert Fox in December 1998. Among those being refitted is the al-Haji missile plant.

Under the 1991 ceasefire agreements, Iraq can develop and test missiles with a range less than 150km (93 miles), and it has actively pursued its tactical programme with the al-Ababil solid-fuel missile. However, US analysts suspect that Iraq has been underpowering its missiles to keep them within the rules, while designed them so they can easily be adapted for longer distances.

At the end of 1998, Iraq had also failed to account for 500 bombs with parachutes designed for delivering chemical or biological weapons, 550 artillery shells filled with mustard gas and 41,658 filled and empty chemical munitions. Iraq claims to have

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