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HEADLINE: BBC dossier source believed to be in Iraq

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THE source for bitterly contested allegations that Downing Street "sexed up" its dossier on Saddam Hussein's weapons of mass destruction is a military expert who is now based in Iraq, BBC insiders are claiming.

The revelation came as the BBC confirmed last night that its governors would meet Mr Dyke tomorrow to discuss the corporation's position before publication of a report by MPs on Monday.

Although the BBC has refused to name the informant, its executives have suggested that disclosure of his identity would transform a debate which has shifted decisively in the Government's favour over recent days.

Andrew Gilligan, the Radio 4 Today programme defence correspondent at the centre of the row, has revealed the name of his source only to Richard Sambrook, the BBC's head of news. The position held - but not the name - of this official is also known to Greg Dyke, the corporation's Director General, and Kevin Marsh, the Editor of Today.

BBC journalists have been told that Mr Gilligan's anonymous source is among the 100 British intelligence and weapons specialists currently in Iraq as part of the American-led survey group searching for Saddam's missing weapons of mass destruction (WMD).

This information is in line with a briefing to The Times from a senior BBC executive this week, who said that attempts to contact Mr Gilligan's source in the past month to ask supplementary questions had proved unsuccessful because of the nature of his position. Asked if he was now based abroad, the executive replied: "Something like that."

The head of the British contingent, Brigadier John Deverell, is unlikely to have been the BBC's source because he has no background in military intelligence and was previously based in Saudi Arabia.

MPs are expected to clear Alastair Campbell, the Prime Minister's communications director, of charges that he forced Intelligence chiefs to include in last year's dossier "unreliable" information about Iraq's capacity to deploy WMD within 45 minutes.

The report by the Commons Foreign Affairs Committee, which is due out on Monday, will criticise Mr Campbell over his handling of intelligence information in general and, in particular, the use of plagiarised material in the later February briefing paper - the so-called dodgy dossier.

However, the BBC is preparing to admit defeat on the 45-minute claims, which have been denied by the heads of all relevant intelligence services.

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