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## BBC on edge of defeat in Iraq dossier row

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THE BBC was preparing for defeat last night in its battle with Downing Street as it became apparent that a report by MPs will clear Alastair Campbell of 'sexing up' the intelligence dossier on Iraq.

Corporation executives have acknowledged to *The Times* that "heads may roll" after such a verdict from the Foreign Affairs Committee and that they will have to broadcast a correction over the most contentious charge levelled at Downing Street.

This was a report by the defence correspondent Andrew Gilligan that Downing Street forced the intelligence services to include "unreliable" information about Iraq's capacity to deploy weapons of mass destruction within 45 minutes.

Mr Gilligan's position is immediately under threat, not least because of an article he wrote for the *Mail* on Sunday alleging that Mr Campbell had personally ordered that the claim be inserted.

The article, for which the corporation accepts "vicarious liability" is understood to have dismayed Richard Sambrook, the BBC's Head of News. He has banned Mr Gilligan from further freelance activity and promised to tighten rules on his journalists writing for newspapers.

In a further sign that the BBC is beginning to climb down the corporation began an internal inquiry into its handling of the story and whether the Government had sufficient opportunity to respond before the report was broadcast.

Mr Gilligan's information came from a single source within the intelligence community, said to be a credible figure, but not a name instantly recognisable even to people familiar with the subject. The informant's identity has since been disclosed to Mr Sambrook, and his position is known to Kevin Marsh, the editor of the *Today* programme, and to Greg Dyke, the BBC Director-General.

The BBC has tried to con-

tact the source again and ask supplementary questions since the original report on May 29, but has been unsuccessful "because of the nature of his position".

It emerged that Mr Gilligan did not take a pen and notebook to his meeting with the source and apparently wrote up his notes of the meeting on a Palm Pilot. This has since been handed to the BBC, which says that it is satisfied the notes are contemporaneous.

Publicly, the BBC is still standing by Mr Gilligan's report, with executives insisting that some of what was alleged has been shown to be true. This included information that the 45-minute claim was inserted into the dossier at a late stage and that it came from a single intelligence source.

Last night the BBC also highlighted what it said were discrepancies between the raw intelligence, warning that Iraq's WMD could be "delivered to units" within 45 minutes, and the dossier's description of such weapons being "deployed" within such a period.

The BBC believes that Mr Gilligan's source is credible but accepts that the description of Mr Campbell's involvement in "sexing up" the dossier may have been a "generic" term for political pressure on the intelligence services. They point out that the original *Today* programme report did not mention Mr Campbell because editors feared the reference was "ambiguous".

If the BBC's case were to crumble because of Mr Gilligan's newspaper article, it would have "more serious consequences for him" than for other senior staff, one executive said yesterday. However, he added: "If we are proved, unequivocally, to have got this wrong then people will have to go, up to and possibly including Richard Sambrook. But we are a long way from that."

Although the MPs' report to be published on Monday will

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effectively clear Mr Campbell, its conclusions will be qualified by saying that they were reached only on the basis on the information available.

The committee will attack the Government's refusal to allow MPs to cross-examine John Scarlett, the chairman of the Joint Intelligence Committee, and make scathing criticisms of a February briefing paper — the so-called "dodgy dossier" — which included plagiarised material from a student thesis. The BBC is expected to seize on this as evidence the Government mishandled intelligence material and in some cases used unreliable information to sustain its case on Iraq's WMD threat.

Mr Dyke is said to believe that Mr Campbell has been "itching" to attack the BBC after being angered by its reports from Baghdad and the prominence it gave to the Labour revolt against war. This has been a long time in coming. Stearn has been building for some time, "an insider said. Mr Dyke, a former Labour donor and has been determined to prove his independence.

However, Mr Campbell is understood to have Mr Dyke in his sights believing that the BBC should not be allowed to make Mr Gilligan a whipping boy for decisions made by the corporation's senior hierarchy. Ministers are expected to use Monday's report as an opportunity to attack the "culture of cynicism" which they say pervades political journalism at the BBC.

There were signs last night that the BBC was ready to change the line of attack, with news bulletins concentrating on a Commons row over the "dodgy dossier". The Tories took the same approach and Michael Ancram, the Shadow Foreign Secretary, provoked fury by telling MPs yesterday that Mr Blair had "duped" Parliament over the February dossier. "Far from being an intelligence service or even a Joint Intelligence Committee production, its authors were the ubiquitous Alastair Campbell and his small band of acolytes," he said.

David Blunkett protested that the remarks were "scurrilous unsubstantiated and disgraceful".

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