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HEADLINE: Scientist named as BBC contact: New twist in row over source for story on Iraq's banned weapons

BYLINE: Richard Norton-Taylor and Matt Wells

A former senior UN weapons inspector was named yesterday as the person said by the Ministry of Defence to have had an "unauthorised" meeting with Andrew Gilligan, the BBC journalist at the centre of the row over Iraq's banned weapons programme

David Kelly, an adviser to the government and an expert in biological warfare who previously worked at the government's Porton Down research centre, was the individual who had admitted discussing the government's September dossier with Gilligan, the MoD said.

Dr Kelly is a renowned microbiologist and was an adviser to the Foreign Office before moving to the MoD. He spent seven years as an Unscorn inspector in the 1990s, visiting Iraq on 37 occasions. He gave evidence to the Commons foreign affairs committee last September.

Malcom Dando, an authority on biological and chemical weapons at Bradford University, described Dr Kelly as "very expert and extremely well-informed. He is very able and very careful."

Dr Kelly's identification was the latest twist in the continuing row between the government and the BBC over claims that Downing Street "sexed up" the September dossier to strengthen its case for war.

Earlier yesterday the defence secretary, Geoff Hoon, wrote to the BBC chairman, Gavyn Davies, demanding to know whether the official who had come forward was the source of Gilligan's original story which sparked the row.

Mr Hoon gave Mr Davies the name of Dr Kelly, asking the corporation to confirm or deny that it was the same person as Gilligan's source.

According to the MoD, Dr Kelly admitted to having met Gilligan. Asked why the 45-minute claim was put in, Dr Kelly said "probably for impact"

Tony Blair's spokesman insisted its approach was "not an assault on journalistic sources, this is not an assault on the BBC, it is not a vendetta" He described it as a "genuine attempt to get at the truth behind what is one of the most serious allegations you can make against a government".

The BBC refused to release any more details about its source, saying it would not be drawn into a trap.

"The MoD has lost all credibility on this issue. It completely changed its story overnight for spurious reasons, and we intend to draw a line under the matter. We are not going to discuss our source "

The MoD yesterday departed in some material ways from its carefully worded statement on Tuesday in what appeared to be a further attempt to put pressure on the BBC.

As this particular dispute continued to simmer, Whitehall officials said the MI6 source behind the claim that Saddam Hussein's troops could deploy chemical and biological weapons within 45 minutes was still in Iraq and remained in a position to provide intelligence.

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