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'BBC mole' says government line on Iraq was credible and factual - Nick Rufford

THE man named as the BBC's mole in the Iraq dossier row has disowned claims that the government "sexed up" the evidence on weapons of mass destruction.

In his first public comments since the row blew up, Dr David Kelly said the government's position on Iraq was "credible and factual".

Downing Street was accused in a report by Andrew Gilligan, the BBC's defence correspondent, of exaggerating the threat from Iraq's weapons of mass destruction to justify going to war.

The BBC report was sourced to an intelligence official who spoke to Gilligan on condition of anonymity. Kelly said. "I met Gilligan at the Charing Cross hotel. I did talk to him about purely factual stuff. The rest is bullshit."

Kelly is due to give evidence to MPs on Tuesday after the foreign affairs committee reopened its inquiry to interview him. The hearing is set to reignite a row which has blown up into a test of credibility between the government and the BBC.

Looking pale and tired, Kelly admitted the affair had played heavily on his mind since it broke six weeks ago. "I have been told by the MoD (Ministry of Defence) not to talk," he said. Dressed in checked shirt and jeans at his home in Oxfordshire, Kelly said he confessed to his bosses that he had spoken to a BBC journalist because he believed the row had got out of hand. "It has been a very difficult time, as you can imagine," he said.

Kelly declined to comment on the question of whether chemical or biological weapons could be deployed in 45 minutes - a central plank of the government's claim that Iraq posed an immediate danger. But by undermining the BBC's report, Kelly has strengthened Downing Street's claim that it is entitled to an apology for the allegation that it had deliberately overstated the threat.

On May 29, BBC Radio 4's Today programme broadcast claims by an unnamed intelligence source that No10 had "sexed up" the dossier. The source was said to have alleged the intelligence services were unhappy at the assertion in the dossier that unconventional weapons could be ready in 45 minutes. Kelly is expected to deny to the committee that he said the words attributed to "an intelligence source" in the BBC report.

Kelly said he was bound by civil service rules and the hotel meeting with Gilligan in May was unauthorised. But he said his unusual position - an MoD employee who spent much of the seven years until 1998 working for the United Nations - meant the government turned a blind eye to his discussions with journalists. "I've been speaking to the press for 10 years," he said. "They (the Foreign Office and MoD) were used to my unorthodox approach."

Kelly said he had not been reprimanded or pressurised by his employers, though he had been warned not to speak to the press. "The MoD has been quite good about it," he said. Speaking shortly before he was named last week, Kelly said:

"I know Gilligan. But I did not talk to him about (Alastair) Campbell's role because I didn't know anything about it."

Kelly was approached by The Sunday Times earlier this month about whether he was the mole in the BBC row. He denied it, but later went to his bosses and told them he had met Gilligan. His action might have been prompted by concern that he was going to be unmasked.

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