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

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BODY:

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 Unscm 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.

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"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.

The source was a senior Iraqi officer on active service when he passed on the claim to his MI6 handlers last August, a month before it was included in the government's controversial dossier on Iraq's banned weapons programme.

It also emerged last night that the parliamentary body chosen by Mr Blair to review the government's case about the threat posed by Iraq would not be given access to the full intelligence behind the government's claims.

Ministers are hoping the intelligence and security committee will clear the government of all charges that it hyped up secret information to boost its case for war.

Unlike the Commons foreign affairs committee, which on Monday published a sceptical report about claims made in the government's dossier, the intelligence and security committee meets in private. Its members are appointed by the prime minister.

MPs on the foreign affairs committee criticised the government for preventing them from having direct access to intelligence material.

Mr Blair has indicated the intelligence and security committee will be able to see intelligence reports denied to the foreign affairs committee. But the Guardian has learned it will not be able to see the original reports on which claims about the state of Iraq's weapons programme were based.

Meanwhile, Gregory Thielmann, a former US intelligence official who served under the Bush administration in the build-up to the Iraq war, accused the White House of lying about the threat posed by Saddam Hussein.

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