

The New York Times

May 21, 2003

U.S. Analysts Link Iraq Labs to Germ Arms

By JUDITH MILLER and WILLIAM J. BROAD

United States intelligence agencies have concluded that two mysterious trailers found in Iraq were mobile units to produce germs for weapons, but they have found neither biological agents nor evidence that the equipment was used to make such arms, according to senior administration officials.

The officials said intelligence analysts in Washington and Baghdad reached their conclusion about the trailers after analyzing, and rejecting, alternative theories of how they could have been used. Their consensus was in a paper presented to the White House late Monday.

"The experts who have crawled over this again and again can come up with no other plausible legitimate use," said one senior official who examined the evidence in detail. One theory that was rejected had recently been put forward by Iraqi scientists who said one of the units was used to produce hydrogen.

Officials in Iraq and Washington emphasized in interviews that because the unit studied in greatest detail had been thoroughly decontaminated with a still-unidentified caustic agent, it was impossible to say whether it had ever produced agents for bioweapons.

"It may have, we don't know," a senior administration official said. "What we know is that it is equipped to do that."

The intelligence analysts' judgment would support some of the evidence that Secretary of State Colin L. Powell presented on Feb. 5 to the United Nations in an effort to build support for the war in Iraq. But their failure to find biological agents raises continuing questions about whether Saddam Hussein's regime had actually made germ weapons, as administration officials claimed.

The administration has come under growing political pressure in recent weeks to show clear evidence to back those claims. Officials said that they expect that the intelligence community's conclusion about the mobile units to become a centerpiece of their argument that Iraq had a well-concealed germ weapons program. Yesterday in Baghdad a military official said that American forces would invite international experts to examine the mobile units, The Associated Press reported.

The six-page white paper, entitled Iraqi Mobile Biological Warfare Production Plants, contains a description of the three trailer units found so far in Iraq and dismisses at least three alternative explanations for their use, an official said yesterday.

The official said it describes two of the labs as production units, and the third as a biological laboratory that could be used for a germ weapons program or for peaceful purposes.

The paper called the trailers an "ingeniously simple, self-contained bioprocessing system," one official said. The paper rejected theories that the two mobile production units were intended to make hydrogen gas for weather balloons or germs for biopesticides to protect crops, or to regenerate rocket fuel.

Repeatedly pressed to discuss the basis for these conclusions, administration officials provided photographs of one of the trailers, a schematic diagram of how experts believe it could have made deadly germs, and interviews with technical experts and other analysts who have observed the units most closely.

This trailer has been analyzed by at least three groups of allied intelligence and technical experts. After it was turned over last month to American soldiers by Kurdish forces near Mosul, three experts from a Pentagon chemical and biological intelligence support team conducted a four-day examination. Assisted by British experts, the team concluded that the trailer was a mobile biological production unit, its members said.

A second group of military and other experts from Washington was then flown to Baghdad, where further tests were conducted. In interviews, one of these experts said he too had concluded that the unit was intended to be a germ producer.

Finally, experts at the Central Intelligence Agency, the Defense Intelligence Agency and other national security units assessed the drawings, reviewed statements by Iraqi scientists still in Iraq and the Iraqi source of one early report that there were mobile germ factories in Iraq.

Within the past 10 days, officials said, Iraqi scientists at Al Kindi, a research and testing facility in northern Iraq, where allied forces found one of the units, told American experts that the two production units were mobile plants to make hydrogen for filling weather balloons.

But American intelligence analysts said that after exhaustively examining evidence to support this theory, they concluded it is a false story, possibly conceived to mislead them.

Each of the two trailer units contains a 2,000-liter vessel. The Iraqi scientists asserted that the vessel was used to mix chemicals together to produce hydrogen gas. But American officials said that engineering surveys and other evidence strongly suggested that the vessel is a fermenter used to multiply seed germs of anthrax and possibly other agents into deadly swarms. Face plates on the vessels show that they were made in 2002 and 2003.

Officials said they were continuing to test residue in the vessel. They said that while it has not yet been identified, it appeared to contain traces of aluminum, a metal that can be used to produce hydrogen. They said it might have been planted by Iraqis to create the illusion that the units had made gas for weather balloons.

American military officers in Iraq said they believe that Iraqi scientists remain reluctant to speak candidly about Mr. Hussein's weapons programs because they fear they could be implicated in possible war crimes or face retribution from members of the fallen regime who are at large.

One senior administration official observed that the mobile laboratories were a violation of Security Council resolutions, whether or not they were used to produce weapons. "It was surely capable of producing biological weapons agent," he said. "Iraq never told the United Nations that it had made such units."

"Why would you have a covert program for filling weather balloons?" the official said.

Late last year, Iraq stated in its formal declaration to the United Nations that the mobile facilities were "refrigeration vehicles and food testing laboratories."

American intelligence officials said that the Iraqi defector who first told Western officials about the existence of the mobile plants was shown photographs of the units found in Iraq. The Iraqi, a chemical engineer, said that the trailers appeared to be modern versions of a germ production unit he had supervised.

The big vessels in two of the units could be used to produce an estimated 500 liters of liquid anthrax and 50 liters of botulinum toxin per batch within two to three days — millions of lethal doses.

"Those are definitely more than terrorist quantities of these agents," said David R. Franz, a senior scientist and former head of the Army defensive biological lab at Fort Detrick, Md.

The schematic diagram was prepared by American experts who have closely studied the most intact production unit. Aside from the central fermenter vessel, there was a tank they believe was for germ food, a compressor to feed air into the fermenter and a refrigeration unit to cool it. The diagram shows that the factory has a system of post-fermenter processing that consists of a compressor that experts said was to remove any gases and dangerous spores and bottle them up in tanks.

Civilian experts on Iraq's program and biological weapons said this gas-capture system appeared to be a hallmark of a clandestine facility, and strongly reinforced the idea that the mobile units were for the production of biological weapons. If spores and signature gasses from the germ food escaped the unit, experts said, inspectors down wind with sensitive detectors might be able to detect the illegal manufacturing.

After being shown some of this material, several civilian experts in biological weapons agreed with the government's consensus.

"There is no doubt in my mind," said William C. Patrick III, a senior official in the United States biological warfare program decades ago. "This is a very simple production facility for an easy-to-grow organism like anthrax."

[Copyright 2003 The New York Times Company](#) | [Home](#) | [Privacy Policy](#) | [Search](#) | [Corrections](#) | [Help](#) | [Back to Top](#)