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Rumsfeld: Lack of evidence could mean Iraq's hiding something

U.S. asks NATO for support in event of war on Iraq

WASHINGTON (CNN) --The failure of U.N. arms inspectors to find weapons of mass destruction "could be evidence, in and of itself, of Iraq's noncooperation" with U.N. disarmament resolutions, U.S. Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld said Wednesday.

Iraq says it has abandoned its efforts to develop nuclear, chemical and biological weapons -- a declaration the United States has dismissed.

The chief U.N. weapons inspector, Hans Blix, told the U.N. Security Council last week that his teams had found no "smoking gun" in nearly two months of inspections but urged more "active cooperation" from Iraq.

"The fact that the inspectors have not yet come up with new evidence of Iraq's WMD program could be evidence, in and of itself, of Iraq's noncooperation," Rumsfeld said. "We do know that Iraq has designed its programs in a way that they can proceed in an environment of inspections and that they are skilled at denial and deception."

Rumsfeld said the United States and the United Nations have no obligation to prove that Iraq has continued efforts to develop nuclear, chemical or biological weapons. Instead, he said, Iraq must prove that it has abandoned them.

At NATO headquarters in Brussels, Belgium, Wednesday, the United States formally asked the North Atlantic Treaty Organization for support in the event of military action against Iraq.

NATO spokesman Yves Brodeur said the U.S. request was based on discussions held between NATO leaders and U.S. Deputy Defense Secretary Paul Wolfowitz on December 4.

Brodeur said the process of discussing what role NATO might play has not begun and there is no timetable yet for those discussions.

The United States is asking that NATO allow use of its assets like AWACS surveillance planes and provide logistical support.

Dispute over Iraqi scientists

But in Congress, Senate Minority Leader Tom Daschle said Wednesday that the Bush administration has failed to report to Congress on the prospect of a war on Iraq, as required by the resolution lawmakers passed in October.

The resolution authorized the president to use U.S. forces to disarm Iraq and called on the president to report to Congress on the situation 60 days after passage.

Also Wednesday, both British and U.S. officials said that Bush and British Prime Minister Tony Blair are scheduled to meet January 31 at Camp David.

Frustrated Bush administration officials are pressing U.N. officials to make a new demand on Iraq.

During a meeting at the U.N. Tuesday, Bush's national security adviser Condoleezza Rice pressed Blix and other senior U.N. officials to demand that Iraq produce certain scientists and their families to be transported abroad for interviews about weapons of mass

to demand that Iraq produce certain scientists and their families to be transported abroad for interviews about weapons of mass destruction programs, sources said Wednesday.

If Iraq refuses, U.S. officials argued it would constitute additional proof that Iraq is unwilling to cooperate with U.N. arms inspectors.

The move would reflect a more muscular interpretation of U.N. resolution 1441 which said inspectors "may at their discretion conduct interviews inside or outside of Iraq, (and) may facilitate the travel of those interviewed and family members outside of Iraq."

U.S. officials note that resolution passed in the Security Council by a vote of 15-0.

To date, U.N. arms inspectors have only asked Iraqi scientists whether they would be willing to be interviewed outside of the country, or in the absence of Iraqi government representatives. None has agreed so far, U.N. officials said.

Blix has expressed some doubt that the new interview powers given to his team are workable. "We cannot force it," he said in November. U.N. officials say they are trying to work out how the powers could be implemented: "it raises a lot of questions" said one.

Inspectors visit Saddam's palace

Meanwhile in Baghdad Wednesday, U.N. arms experts inspected a presidential palace in the al-Karadah district that is known popularly as the Old Palace. It is their second visit to a residence of President Saddam Hussein since inspections resumed last November.

CNN's Rym Brahimi said the visit comes at a time when the Iraqis are complaining about the behavior of inspectors.

The palace was built after the fall of the Iraqi monarchy in 1958 and was twice bombed during 1991 Gulf War and subsequently repaired.

Inspectors visited another presidential site, the al-Sajoud palace in Baghdad December 3. The Iraqis did not obstruct the visit, but protested the following day that it was unnecessary.

Iraq strongly resisted searches of presidential grounds under a previous U.N. inspection regime in the 1990s, leading to an agreement whereby such visits could take place only with notice and an escort of foreign diplomats.

However, Resolution 1441 explicitly gives the inspectors the right to visit any site in Iraq at any time and without warning.

U.N. inspectors headed to at least five other sites, according to Iraq's Ministry of Information:

- a nuclear team went to Hoptain Company, and Al Qa'qaa Company -- a large complex housing several sites about 40 kilometers south of Baghdad;
- another nuclear team visited Al Ameen site;
- a biological team visited a farm in Dora on the outskirts of Baghdad;
- a chemical team went to a warehouse in Khan Dhani, west of Baghdad.

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