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Soil Sample Provoked U.S. Attack On Plant

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WASHINGTON - A soil sample obtained clandestinely led the Clinton administration to conclude that a Sudanese plant targeted last week in a missile attack was developing a key ingredient in deadly VX nerve gas, U.S. intelligence officials said yesterday.

The officials, who spoke on condition of anonymity, also said there was evidence that senior Iraqi scientists had aided the effort to make VX at that factory and at another plant a couple of miles away.

The connection with **Iraq** emerged as a key part of the administration's argument for why it was justified in launching cruise missiles at a plant in another country without any warning.

The sample contained a rare chemical that would require two more complex steps to be turned into VX, one of the deadliest nerve agents in existence, and the chemical, whose acronym is EMPTA, has no industrial uses, the sources said.

"Once you have it, you're a long way toward the production of VX," said one intelligence official. The material apparently got into the soil immediately outside the plant "either through airborne emissions or spillage from the manufacturing process."

The official did not describe how the soil sample was obtained.

"This is something we went out of our way to get."

At a news conference in Khartoum, the Sudanese president, Omar Hassan el-Bashir, kept up his sharp attacks on the United States and President Clinton, saying Clinton ordered the attack on El Shifa Pharmaceutical Industries plant to cover up the furor over his relationship with Monica Lewinsky.

Clinton and his senior aides have described the evidence linking the factory to the production of VX as compelling and even irrefutable, though until yesterday the administration refused to discuss the evidence in any but the most general way.

The officials who spoke on condition of anonymity said the soil sample, collected outside the factory in Khartoum, contained traces of EMPTA, a "precursor chemical" whose full name is ethylmethylphosphonothionate. There would be no viable explanation for the presence of that chemical, they said, other than the production of VX.

There are a number of ways to make the agent, but the officials in Washington and other American and foreign officials said the technique using EMPTA is one that **Iraq** used to develop its own VX stockpiles in the 1980s.

Officials in Washington and at the United Nations said there were a number of other factors linking **Iraq** to the pharmaceutical plant, as well as a second facility.

Earlier this year, President Saddam Hussein's government asked the committee that monitors U.N. sanctions to allow it to buy medicines from the factory under the "oil for food" program that allows humanitarian supplies into **Iraq**.

A senior intelligence official said that one of the leaders of **Iraq's** chemical weapons program, Emad al-Ani, had close ties with senior Sudanese officials at the factory. The official said a number of Iraqi scientists working for al-Ani had attended the grand opening of the factory two years ago.

Although the United States struck at the Shifa plant, officials in Washington acknowledged that the second plant is also suspected of making chemical weapons. That site, according to diplomats in New York and the **Sudan**, has been frequently visited by Iraqi technicians and was more heavily guarded than the

Shifa plant.

The Shifa plant was destroyed Thursday in a U.S. cruise missile attack at the same time that Navy-launched missiles struck at a suspected terrorist base in eastern Afghanistan.

In an echo of the controversy over the bombing of a purported baby formula factory during the Persian Gulf War, Sudanese officials have protested to the United Nations that the plant made medicine, not weapons.

The Clinton administration also conceded for the first time, after eyewitness accounts from the smoldering ruins of the Shifa plant, that the facility probably also manufactured medicines.

"That facility very well may have been producing pharmaceuticals," State Department spokesman James Foley said. Among other things, the plant had been approved to produce medicine for shipment to **Iraq** under the humanitarian exception to the U.N.-imposed trade sanctions on that country.

"But that in no way alters the fact that the factory also was producing precursor elements," Foley said.

Intelligence gathered during this effort showed ties between senior executives of the plant and known terrorist groups, including the one headed by Osama bin Laden, the Saudi multimillionaire believed responsible for the Aug. 7 bombings of U.S. Embassies in Kenya and Tanzania, he said.

Also yesterday, bin Laden's organization sent another communique to its followers that appears to soften his earlier inflammatory rhetoric, urging Muslims to avoid striking civilian targets, KnightRidder news service reported.

In the new message, reportedly sent from bin Laden's camp in Afghanistan and signed by Sheik **Abdullah** Abu al-Farouq, the leader of the political wing of bin Laden's World Islamic Front, Muslim fighters were told "to make a jihad holy war for the cause of God and against enemies of Islam and Muslims, and do not direct your weapons to your brother Muslims."

"And avoid civilians. Direct your attacks to the American army and her allies, the infidels." Although the communique, faxed to Knight Ridder from bin Laden's supporters in London and translated from Arabic, contained only praise for those engaged in the jihad, it was clearly softer than bin Laden's previous statements, which warned that civilian and military targets would be treated equally.

This report contains material from The Associated Press, KnightRidder news service and The New York Times.

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