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IRAQ'S LINKS WITH SUDAN

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LINDA WERTHEIMER, HOST: The State Department now says that **Iraq** has played a role in helping **Sudan** develop a chemical weapons program. **Iraq** may also have used **Sudan** to hide its own chemical weapons from the prying eyes of UN weapons inspectors. And it may have had a direct connection to the plant in Khartoum destroyed by U.S. missiles last week. MIKE SHUSTER, NPR REPORTER: Last Thursday when cruise missiles demolished the El Shifa Pharmaceuticals factory in Khartoum, U.S. officials said the plant was targeted because the terrorist leader Osama bin Laden held a financial interest in the plant. The plant produced an ingredient for deadly VX gas, and bin Laden was known to be seeking chemical weapons.

Sudan denies these charges.

This week, the U.S. government modified its story. It now says bin Laden's connection were to the Sudanese military industrial complex generally. Officials say the U.S. does possess soil samples containing the precursor to VX, taken near the plant. But they have added another element: **Iraq's** links to chemical weapons in **Sudan** and to the Shifa plant in particular.

State Department spokesman James Foley.

JAMES FOLEY, SPOKESMAN, U.S. STATE DEPARTMENT: We are concerned about the possibility **Iraq** may have made an agreement with **Sudan** to allow it to continue its pursuit of chemical weapons without being subject to the scrutiny of UN weapons inspectors.

We have evidence of ties between **Sudan's** chemical weapons aspirations, the Shifa facility and other chemical weapons actors. And there is evidence that **Sudan** sought help in the pursuit of a CW capability from other countries, principally **Iraq**.

SHUSTER: This represents a sharp turnaround for the administration. In February, an informal group of Republican members of Congress who comprise a task force on terrorism, issued a report documenting a lengthy relationship between **Iraq** and **Sudan** on chemical weapons.

At the time, with the U.S. threatening military action against **Iraq** if it did not permit unlimited UN weapons inspections, the White House challenged the report's credibility by saying there was no evidence **Iraq** had exported such weapons or the capacity to produce them.

The report said that **Iraq** constructed several chemical weapons facilities for **Sudan**, and that in 1995 Saddam Hussein specifically authorized the transfer of some technology to **Sudan** to hide it from UN weapons inspectors.

Yusef Bodanski (ph), who wrote the report for the task force, says that cooperation continues to day, and crucial elements of **Iraq's** capacity to manufacture chemical weapons are hidden in **Sudan**.

YOUSEF BODANSKI, AUTHOR OF CONGRESSIONAL REPORT ON IRAQI CHEMICAL WEAPONS: Everything from computer databases to bits of computer sophisticated subcomponents, some samples, things that would enable them to revive production, should the need arise, or whenever circumstances permit, I should say.

SHUSTER: Now, the State Department has essentially confirmed it broad strokes what the task force report asserted months ago.

Still, spokesman James Foley insists it was the bin Laden connection most of all that prompted the attack.

FOLEY: The fact that there were Iraqi connections to this plant and to this Sudanese intention to develop such a capability, it was certainly a matter of concern to policy makers in Washington, but the attack itself though was motivated by the concern of bin Laden's evident desire to

obtain such a capability.

SHUSTER: There is a known connection between **Iraq** and the El Shifa plant that is benign. The plant received a contract from the UN to provide medicine to **Iraq** under the so-called "oil for food" deal, where **Iraq** is permitted to sell oil and use the proceeds to buy humanitarian supplies.

Iraq's ambassador to the UN, Nizar Hamdun, denied **Iraq** had any other connection to the **Sudan** plant.

NIZAR HAMDUN, IRAQI AMBASSADOR TO THE UNITED NATIONS: **Iraq** has had pharmaceutical contacts with the government of **Sudan**, and I believe that this was the factory that was producing those medicines. So in that context, we have had commercial ties, but nothing beyond that, and we strongly deny that there has been any chemical connections regarding that.

SHUSTER: The House report used U.S., German and Israeli intelligence among other sources, information that the White House presumably had access to when it denied the **Iraq-Sudan** connection back in February.

Mike Shuster, NPR News, New York.

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