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SADDAM'S ANTHRAX PLAN TO POISON BRITAIN; Blair Authorises Secret All -ports Alert

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SADDAM HUSSEIN is threatening to swamp Britain with deadly **anthrax** bacteria in bottles of duty-free perfume or drink.

Tony Blair authorised a top secret all-ports alert after intelligence sources in **Iraq** discovered the plan. Whitehall sources admitted last night that the threat was being taken 'very seriously'.

Customs, Special Branch and undercover Defence Ministry teams were put on standby six days ago but news of the alarm emerged only last night when a secret Home Office 'need-to-know' document was leaked.

Dated March 18, it was sent to security officials manning all ports and airports, demanding extra vigilance, after intelligence sources in **Iraq** alerted the Government to the plot.

It reveals that **Saddam** has plans to smuggle large amounts of **anthrax** into 'hostile countries' inside bottles that would normally contain spirits or cosmetics, as well as in cigarette lighters and perfume sprays.

It says: '**Iraq** may launch chemical and biological attack using material disguised as harmless fluids. Could officers therefore be alert for any items which might contain harmful substances.

Particular attention should be given to containers of any size holding liquids with specific characteristics.' Last night a spokesman for the Prime Minister said: 'We can confirm that an all-ports warning was issued last week and that the document is authentic.' He stressed, however, that no evidence has yet come to light that an **anthrax** smuggling operation is already under way although evidence is available to Whitehall 'that a threat has been made and is being taken seriously'.

Ministers believe that the order would be given from Baghdad if the Western powers decided to launch military strikes against **Iraq**.

Biological warfare experts stressed last night that the threat would be limited to people who came into direct contact with the bacteria. Without the means of spreading it widely through the air, the Iraqis would be unable to cause mass casualties.

Chemical warfare expert Dr Alistair Hay said: 'Just having the bottle and releasing the contents wouldn't be terribly effective but it would certainly kill a number of people.' Home Office Minister Mike O'Brien said: 'We don't want to get people particularly scared. Steps have already been taken. We are very good at dealing with these things.' He said it was not a 'specific' threat to Britain. In fact, the intelligence received by the UK authorities has also been flashed to the United States and other Nato nations involved in the recent diplomatic and military stand-off with Baghdad. Similar precautions are being taken elsewhere.

And one defence source warned that any attempt by **Saddam** to launch germ warfare attacks against Western nations would trigger a swift military response.

Customs and Excise spokesman Ranald Macdonald said: 'It has been taken very seriously. The specifics of this information are very unusual.

'We have not found any yet and unless one had more specific information then clearly it would be inordinately difficult to do so. There is nothing specific about it.' He warned that the implications were massive because of the millions of tons of duty-free that are brought into Britain each day.

'Customs officers routinely inspect duty-free and other goods to make sure they are what they say they are. Drug importers use duty-free so it is something we are aware of,' he said. It was fears about **Saddam's** chemical and biological warfare capability that almost brought Britain and America to the brink of launching air strikes on **Iraq** after he expelled UN weapons inspectors investigating his weapons sites.

The crisis was solved only at the 11th hour after he backed down and allowed them back.

Saddam deployed chemical warfare weapons during the nine-year battles with neighbouring Iran in the 1980s, and has since gassed thousands of Kurds and other dissidents inside his own country.

Anthrax was tested on Iranian prisoners, dispensed from a spray, leaving its victims dying in agony.

Large quantities of Iraqi **anthrax** and other biological and chemical weapons were deployed from Kuwait during the Gulf War, in preparation for use against Allied troops.

In 1995 **Saddam** admitted manufacturing half a million litres of **anthrax**, but claimed he had no means of delivering the deadly substance. Just weeks ago, the Government launched a campaign to persuade the 3,500 Service personnel deployed in the Gulf to undergo **anthrax** vaccination programmes as a precaution.

Defence Secretary George Robertson gave an example by getting himself inoculated, along with his Armed Forces Minister Dr John Reid and Chief of the Defence Staff General Sir Charles Guthrie.

Mr Robertson declared in a message to the troops at the time: 'The fact is that **Saddam** Hussein has lied and cheated about this programme to acquire weapons of mass destruction. This is why you are in the Gulf, to ensure he does not rebuild his capability.' Concerns were raised that the vaccine, produced in 1991 with a shelf life of two years, was now out-of-date.

Mr Robertson insisted, however, that it was safe and had been approved for use until November this year by the Medicines Control Agency.

The inoculation programme was organised after the U.S. decided to vaccinate all its military personnel.

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