

washingtonpost.com

Anthrax Type That Killed May Have Reached Iraq

Baghdad's Bid to Obtain Microbe Fuels Suspicions

By Colum Lynch

Special to The Washington Post

Sunday, November 25, 2001; Page A12

UNITED NATIONS -- In August 1988, two key figures in Iraq's secret germ warfare program attended a scientific conference in Winchester, England, to survey advances in the battle against the anthrax disease.

Professor Nassir Hindawi and a colleague, Abdul Rahman Thamer, attracted little attention at the gathering, which was sponsored by scientists from the British biodefense institute at Porton Down.

But U.N. inspectors who uncovered Iraq's secret biological weapons years later believe that the trip was part of a covert mission to identify foreign suppliers for Baghdad's biological weapons program and to obtain deadly anthrax microbes, including the Ames strain, a highly virulent anthrax bacteria found in letters sent to American targets.

Shortly after the visit, Baghdad's trade ministry telexed an order to Porton Down for samples of the Ames strain and at least two other varieties of anthrax microbes. But the British scientists were suspicious that Baghdad might be seeking to develop biological weapons. "There were requests for anthrax strains, and they were denied," said Porton Down spokeswoman Sue Ellison.

U.S. officials and former U.N. weapons experts have found no proof that the Iraqi scientists obtained the Ames strain from another supplier. But Iraq's attempt to obtain the Ames microbes has fueled suspicions among some U.S. and U.N. experts that Iraq may yet be linked to the series of biological attacks against the United States.

"We know that Iraq was very keen on obtaining that specific strain as well as others, and they were contacting many countries of the world," said retired Col. Richard Spertzel, a microbiologist and former head of biological inspection teams in Iraq for the United Nations. "The effort with which they [pursued] Porton Down would suggest that if they thought someone else had it, they would press for it. But we simply don't know."

Porton Down scientists obtained the Ames strain in the early 1980s from the U.S. Army Medical Research Institute for Infectious Diseases (USAMRIID) at Fort Detrick, Md. The deadly pathogen has been passed to an unknown number of scientists.

Iraq's unsuccessful attempt to secure the Ames bacteria from Britain represented a minor setback in its largely successful campaign in the mid-1980s to acquire ingredients for a massive covert biological weapons program.

Iraq sought materials from government and commercial labs in the United States, Europe and Africa.

"The Iraqis had set up this very secret and very sophisticated procurement system so that there would be no

Featured Advertisement **XEROX**

Advertisement

BudgetTravelOnline.com

CLICK HERE FOR A CHANCE TO



A TRIP FOR TWO TO



BERMUDA

CLICK HERE!

BudgetTravelOnline.com

chance that outsiders could figure out what they were doing," said Raymond Zalinskas, a former U.N. inspector who is now senior scientist in residence at the Monterey Institute of International Studies.

In 1988, Iraqi scientists obtained from a private British business, Oxoid Ltd., and other suppliers, nearly 40 tons of medium to grow anthrax and botulinum bacterium for its biological weapons, according to former U.N. officials and a 1999 U.N. report.

Iraq also acquired at least two other forms of anthrax, the Sterne strain, commonly used in an animal vaccine, and the A-3 strain derived from Spanish sheep, from France's Institut Pasteur.

"There was absolutely no reason to refuse an order from Iraq in the 1980s," said Michael Haynes, a spokesman for Unilever, the Anglo-Dutch consumer goods giant that owned Oxoid until 1997. Haynes noted that Iraq at that time was not considered hostile to the West and was under no economic sanctions. "As far as we knew the growth medium would be used for genuine medical, humanitarian purposes," he said.

U.N. inspectors got their first glimpse at Iraq's offensive biological weapons program during an August 1991 U.N. inspection of Salman Pak, one of Iraq's premier biological weapons facilities.

Rihab Taha, the head of Iraq's germ warfare program, provided a team of U.N. biologists with several sealed glass vials containing freeze-dried anthrax spores. The vials included two variants of the Vollum strain, which had been used in U.S. and British biological weapons programs.

The Iraqi scientist initially claimed that some of the anthrax spores were used in research but had never been weaponized. Baghdad also acknowledged that it had received the two Vollum strains and five other strains of anthrax bacterium from the American Type Culture Collection, a commercial germ bank now located near Manassas, Va.

Iraqi documents later obtained by the United Nations indicated that Baghdad subsequently filled more than 50 bombs and missile warheads with a liquid form of Vollum anthrax.

DNA analysis conducted on remnants of Iraq's Al-Hussein warheads at the Al-Nibai missile destruction site revealed traces of bacteria similar to the Vollum anthrax strain. "I can't say with one hundred percent certainty that they are identical," Spertzel said. "But they are consistent with Vollum."

The U.S. company also sold Iraq several strains of *Clostridium botulinum*, a poisonous toxin that paralyzes the muscles and lungs and kills by suffocation. Iraq acknowledged producing at least 19,000 liters of botulinum toxin, using more than half to fill at least 116 bombs and missile warheads.

Staff writer Joby Warrick contributed to this report.

© 2001 The Washington Post Company