

Iraqi BW Program May Be Key to Standoff with UN

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IRAQ'S BIOLOGICAL weapons (BW) program has emerged as a key factor in Baghdad's latest confrontation with the United Nations, and the United States in particular, with the chief UN weapons monitor suggesting UN inspectors may be getting closer to uncovering Iraq's BW potential. The standoff continued through the first week of November after a high level UN delegation failed to convince Iraqi President Saddam Hussein to drop his October 29 demand that American UN Special Commission (UNSCOM) inspectors leave the country and UNSCOM cease overflights of U.S. operated U 2 aircraft used for verification activities. The UN Security Council immediately rejected Baghdad's demands, and Iraq threatened to shoot down the aircraft and turned away UN inspection teams due to the presence of American inspectors.

In a November 5 letter to the Security Council's president, Qin Huasan of China, UNSCOM Executive Chairman Richard Butler complained of Iraq's blockage of inspections and its moving of dual use items away from the view of UNSCOM monitoring cameras during the standoff. Butler warned the council that, in the absence of inspections, it would take Iraq "only a matter of hours to adapt fermenters to produce seed stocks of biological warfare agent."

During a November 5 interview on the "Lehrer Newshour," Butler said he questioned the timing of Iraq's October 29 ultimatum, given recent progress between Baghdad and UNSCOM. "I think one of the possible reasons why they did that was maybe because we were getting closer to putting the finger on their very serious biological capability," Butler said.

On October 16, Butler told the Security Council that Iraq's BW program remains "the area of deepest and ongoing concern" to UNSCOM. Ten days earlier UNSCOM had released a biannual report on Iraqi compliance with UN resolutions mandating the destruction and future monitoring of prohibited weapons of mass destruction and delivery systems. Although the report noted "significant progress" in the missile area, resolving concerns that Iraq was possibly retaining a small force of prohibited missiles, and "important progress" in the chemical weapons program, the report was critical of Iraq's failure to fully disclose information on its proscribed BW program and Baghdad's continuing interference with inspections and the monitoring regime.

In response, the Security Council on October 23 approved Resolution 1134, which "condemned" Iraq's actions but fell short of language favored by the United States and Britain that would have imposed a travel ban on Iraqi officials associated with non compliance. Five council members—Russia, China, France, Egypt and Kenya—abstained from the vote, and some observers cited the apparent rift in the Security Council as one of the reasons Hussein issued his October 29 ultimatum.

An incomplete picture of Iraq's BW program has existed since UNSCOM was established in 1991, the same year Iraq acceded to the Biological Weapons Convention, which bans the use and production of BW weapons. Baghdad denied having an offensive program until 1995, when UNSCOM acquired evidence to the contrary and the defection of a high ranking Iraqi military officer compelled Iraq to admit to an extensive BW program that continued after the Gulf War. Although Iraq has submitted a number of full, final and complete disclosure (FFCD) reports on its BW programs, UNSCOM has not accepted any of the six official versions or four drafts intended to reveal the full scope of Iraq's BW research, weaponization and testing.

Following the submission of Iraq's latest FFCD on September 11, UNSCOM convened a panel of 15 BW experts in New York from September 29 to October 3 to review the declaration against past

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Published on Arms Control Association (<https://www.armscontrol.org>)

submissions and evidence gathered by UN inspectors. The panel called the problems arising from Iraqi non compliance "numerous and grave," and listed 11 areas of concern, ranging from weapons accounting to the defensive tone of the FFCD on the question of military involvement in the program.

One panel member, speaking on the condition of anonymity, noted that out of over 600 pages in the FFCD, only four to five pages addressed military involvement. "We will not gain a good insight into the BW program until the doctrine is revealed and the reasons for deception are presented in a credible fashion," the participant said. According to the panel, quantitative assessments of the program's "scale and scope" are not possible without such information.

UNSCOM's October 6 report termed Iraq's latest FFCD submission unsatisfactory and said it contained "no significant changes" from the previously rejected version that was submitted in June 1996. Specifically, the report said that unaccounted for anthrax growth media was sufficient "for the production of over three times more" than amounts stated previously. However, the panel member said actual anthrax production figures are significantly higher than three times the 8,500 liters declared by Iraq in October 1995.

In contrast to the BW program, UNSCOM reported a greater degree of success in the missile area in its October 6 report, saying it had accounted for 817 of 819 "imported combat missiles." In addition, all "declared operational missile launchers, both imported and indigenously produced," have been identified.

The report also cited progress in the chemical weapons area, including destruction by UNSCOM of large amounts of agent, precursor chemicals, munitions and production facilities. However, some 550 mustard agent filled artillery munitions declared by Iraq remain unaccounted for, and there are continuing questions regarding Iraqi research and production of the third generation nerve agent VX. UNSCOM believes that Baghdad may have produced much more of the agent than previously reported and continues "significant efforts" to conceal the program. To date, 614 tons of declared VX precursor chemicals remain unaccounted for by UNSCOM.

In addition, full verification of proscribed missile warheads, especially chemical and biological weapon warheads, remains unresolved. While its declarations have varied over the years, Iraq now declares that it produced 80 such warheads (50 with chemical weapons, 25 for BW and five that UNSCOM has confirmed were consumed in trials). According to the biannual report, UNSCOM was able to confirm the destruction of 30 additional chemical warheads, but notes that "it is impossible to confirm the destruction of all of the [remaining] 45 special warheads because of the absence of data from Iraq." UNSCOM also suspects that "a number of additional special warheads" may exist.

Iraqi compliance in the nuclear weapons area is covered by the International Atomic Energy Agency in a separate report to the Security Council. In a November 9 interview on "Face the Nation," Secretary of State Madeleine Albright said, "The nuclear file is the closest to being closed. But we are concerned there are still some components there."

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