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EXTRA

INITIAL TESTS INDICATE CHEMICAL WEAPONS IN IRAQ

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U.S. forces have found "suspicious" sites that may contain the weapons of mass destruction President Bush says Saddam Hussein illegally hid from international weapons inspectors.

Coalition forces may have found chemical weapons at an Iraqi training facility. However further tests are needed to determine whether the materials are banned **weapons of mass destruction**, military officials told reporters Monday.

U.S. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld said that while the news reports sounded "responsible," nearly all **preliminary** reports from the battlefield change after further investigation.

"We don't do first reports and we don't speculate, and I can tell you it takes days to get samples of things," Rumsfeld said Monday.

"I think that the prudent thing in a case like this would be to let the thing play itself out, we'll see, we'll eventually know," he added.

Preliminary tests were positive

One report of a possible weapons site came from a U.S. officer on the ground in Iraq who told MSNBC reporter Dana Lewis that preliminary tests of 14 newly-buried barrels were positive for chemical weapons.

The Reuters news agency reported that the tests indicated a "cocktail" of dangerous chemical substances inside the sealed barrels.

Reuters correspondent Kieran Murray, reporting from a U.S. base near Karbala, said that Maj. Michael Hamlet of the U.S. 101st Airborne Division said the tests revealed the presence of **nerve agents sarin and tabun** and the **blister agent lewisite**. Experts planned further testing on Tuesday to verify the initial results.

The smoking gun?

"If tests from our experts confirm this, this could be the smoking gun. It would prove [Iraqi President Saddam Hussein] has the weapons we have said he has all along," Hamlet said. "But right now we just don't know."

In Washington, Rumsfeld said U.S. forces were taking steps to maintain a "chain of custody" for any evidence of weapons of mass destruction soldiers might find on the battlefield.

President Bush has repeatedly said Iraq has weapons of mass destruction, a claim that was central to the administration's rationale for going to war.

Iraq has steadfastly denied possessing such items. During an April 1 televised statement, Iraqi Vice President Taha Yassin Ramadan said the coalition might plant weapons of mass destruction and blame Iraq for their presence.

"The aggressors may themselves intend to bring those materials to plant them here and say those are weapons of mass destruction," he said.

U.N. weapons inspectors

U.N. weapons inspectors left Iraq in 1998 after disagreements with the Saddam government. They re-entered Baghdad in November 2002 and reported limited but unsatisfactory cooperation from Saddam Hussein's regime. In March 2003, the United States, Great Britain and Spain announced the end of the diplomatic process and the beginning of military action to respond to what they said was Iraq's continued defiance of the international community.

According to inspectors, the three-months of inspections produced no solid evidence of chemical or biological weapons though some banned materials were found. However, the United States maintained that it had **intelligence** that proved Iraq harbored such weapons.

According to State Department documents, Iraq has not accounted for 17,000 liters of anthrax; 19,000 liters of botulin toxin; 1.5 tons VX nerve gas; 1,000 tons of mustard gas; and 30,000 delivery systems, which include artillery shells and missile warheads. The document says the numbers are based on U.N. estimates.

A recent poll suggests a majority of Americans support the war even if U.S. forces do not find weapons of mass destruction. The Washington Post -ABC News poll of 511 adults around the country showed that more than 69 percent thought the war is justified even if the United States fails to turn up biological or chemical weapons. That's up from 53 percent in a survey taken the day after the war started.

Vocabulary

weapons of mass destruction – weapons with the capability to inflict mass casualties and destruction: nuclear, biological and chemical weapons or the means to deliver them (U.S. Department of Defense)

preliminary - something that precedes or is introductory or preparatory (Merriam-Webster)

nerve agent – affect the transmission of nerve impulses in the nervous system. "Nerve agents are the most toxic and rapidly acting of the known chemical warfare agents." (Center for Disease Control)

sarin – a clear colorless and tasteless liquid that has no odor in its pure form; classified as a nerve agent; originally created as a pesticide (Center for Disease Control)

tabun – man made chemical warfare agent classified as a nerve agent; a clear colorless tasteless liquid with a faint fruity odor; originally created as a pesticide (Center for Disease Control)

blister agent – chemical warfare agent that causes blistering of the skin and mucous membranes on contact (Center for Disease Control)

lewisite – chemical warfare agent classified as a blister agent; an oily colorless liquid in its pure form but can appear amber to black in its impure form; no medical or practical use (Center for Disease Control)

intelligence - information concerning an enemy or possible enemy or an area (Merriam-Webster)