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Commentary on Secretary Powell's Statement regarding Iraq

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Secretary Powell made a case that is likely to become steadily more convincing as experts read it over and interpret the details. It was not flashy or dramatic, but it involved a great deal of technical data that is new, and makes a strong case that UN inspection will not work and that Iraq's threat is more imminent than previously reported.

The content of the Powell speech is particularly impressive, given the fact that the US had to be extremely careful to avoid giving up key targeting data, revealing intelligence sources and methods, and giving Iraq advance notice of what UNMOVIC and the IAEA might go on to inspect.

Several points deserve special note:

- * Powell described a systematic effort to deceive the UN before and after 1441 was passed on a national scale and involving every element of proliferation, including chemical, biological, nuclear weapons and delivery systems.
- * He mentioned in passing that the effort is directed by Saddam's son Qusay, the head of Iraq's key intelligence organization, the Special Security Service (SSO) and the custodian of Iraq's WMD programs.
- * The passing reference to removing computer hard drives is actually much more important than it seems, since Iraq has learned the hard way that paper records are hard to destroy and conceal. Iraqi conversion to computer records storage means UNMOVIC and the IAEA now confront a much more serious problem than UNSCOM did.
- * He described a far more lethal current chemical threat than had been previously announced. In discussing Taji, he talked about some 65 sites and four bunkers full of munitions at Taji alone. He also talked about 100-500 tons of stockpiled chemical weapons and holdings of some 16,000 122-mm rockets. This is a far more serious existing chemical weapons inventory than any previous report has warned about.
- * He talked about field mobile trucks carry conventional weapons and

accompanied by decontamination vehicles, implying a mobile, dispersible chemical weapons program.

* He gave the figure 4 tons for VX gas, a somewhat different figure from the UN. He also talked about ongoing purchases of Vinyl Chloride, a key VX precursor, as well as buy agents for more mustard gas. He supported this with examples of ongoing purchases of chemical weapons production equipment.

* His description of the Iraqi deception facilities at Al Mussayyib was far more detailed than any previous discussion, and the combination of grading and removal of top soil is particularly important because it means Iraq now can cheat on some of the key UN inspection techniques.

* He may have exaggerated the value of dual use facilities by saying they could be turned around on a dime, but he raised the key point that Iraq can go on proliferating simply by buying dual use facilities and then suddenly shifting them to production of CBRN weapons.

* He talked about physical evidence of similar concealment "house keeping" at 30 sites, including missile and biological sites.

* He talked about trains and truck based biological weapons production facilities, not just research facilities. His diagram and text make the first firm reference to Iraq having dry storable biological weapons which can be 100 times more lethal than the wet agents which are the only agents Iraq is known to have mass produced in the past.

* The diagrams showing three vehicle groups of BW production trucks and his reference to a total of 18 vehicles means Iraq can deploy up to three field production complexes, ignoring Iraq's trains.

* He talked about dozens of agents, but Anthrax was obviously the key. He did not, however, mention smallpox, which the US has seen as Iraq's most lethal weapon and which is the focus of its immunization program. He talked about 25,000 liters of growth material, of which only 8,500 seem to be accounted for (slightly different figures from UNSCOM).

* He discussed massive live human experiments for the first time. The figure 1,600 is extremely high.

* He largely refuted the IAEA report's comments on aluminum tubes, describing an effort that only makes sense in the context of a nuclear weapons program and supported it with new details on 20-30 gram magnets and an announcement that Iraq had bought specialized balancing machines as late as 2001. This makes a future nuclear weapon a much more serious risk.

* He mentioned several times that Iraq continued to work on sprayers for aircraft and UAVs. These can be used in line source attacks where CBW agents are 10-100 times more lethal than the unitary missile warheads and bombs Iraq had in 1991. He also talked about a small UAV with 500 kilometers range (way above the 90 km Iraq has admitted to and the 150 km UN limit to the range of any cruise missile. This would give Iraq a much more lethal long-range strike capability than previously estimated.

*He talked about low dozens of Scuds with ranges up to 900 kilometers: This is the first recent reference to Iraq still possessing Al Abid missiles with 900 km ranges. The usual figures cover the Al Hussein with 600 Km range).

* His reference to the Al Samoud II missile, and the timing of the 380 SA-2 engines Iraq imported shows a clear Iraqi pattern of violations, providing some additional details over the UNMOVIC and IAEA report. The photo coverage of the new Iraq rocket motor test stand is convincing evidence of new efforts to develop very large missiles. He did not mention this, but Iraq may be using the Al Samoud to test reentry of more modern warheads. Its crude unitary, ground impact warheads of the past have been a major limitation.