

[Print this Page](#)

Documents linking Iraq to uranium were forged

By JEFF SALLOT
From Saturday's Globe and Mail

POSTED AT 1:54 AM EST

Saturday, Mar. 8, 2003

Ottawa — Secret documents detailing attempts by Iraq to buy uranium for nuclear warheads from Niger are forgeries, the UN's nuclear watchdog agency says.

Mohamed ElBaradei, the director-general of the International Atomic Energy Agency, said Friday his investigators and independent document examination experts have determined the letters and other written material are "not authentic."

The forgeries were sold to an Italian intelligence agent by a con man some time ago and passed on to French authorities, but the scam was uncovered by the IAEA only recently, according to United Nations sources familiar with the investigation. The documents were turned over to the IAEA several weeks ago.

In fact, the IAEA says, there is no credible evidence that Iraq tried to import uranium ore from the Central African country in violation of UN resolutions.

"Based on thorough analysis, the IAEA has concluded, with the concurrence of outside experts, that these documents, which formed the basis for the reports of these uranium transactions between Iraq and Niger, are, in fact, not authentic," Mr. ElBaradei told the UN Security Council Friday.

"We have also concluded that these specific allegations are unfounded," he said.

Mr. ElBaradei also said there is no reason to believe Iraq has been able to reconstitute its nuclear weapons program.

IAEA inspectors have found "no indication of nuclear-related prohibited activities at any inspected site," he said.

His report is yet another blow to U.S. efforts to convince the Security Council that the regime of Saddam Hussein is secretly trying to develop nuclear warheads and other weapons of mass destruction and that it must be disarmed by force.

The forgeries were the work of a con man who simply saw an opportunity to make some money, the sources say.

There is no evidence that the forgeries were part of a dirty tricks operation by the United States or any other government to discredit Iraq, even though U.S. and British officials said the documents supported their case against the Baghdad regime.

A British intelligence report made public last month by Prime Minister Tony Blair's government, supposedly documenting Iraqi efforts to build weapons of mass destruction, later proved to be plagiarized in large part from an academic paper written by a scholar in

California.

The forged nuclear documents were a "clever cut-and-paste job" that on the face of it indicate Iraq was trying to buy uranium ore from Niger between 1999 and 2001, one of the sources said.

The agency's investigators interviewed officials in Niger and Iraq and hired independent document examination experts to compare the documents, handwriting and signatures to known authentic documents.

Any attempt to sell uranium ore or other material that could be used to manufacture a nuclear warhead would be a serious violation of UN disarmament orders and could result in economic sanctions being imposed against the offending country.

Niger, a poor country that depends heavily on foreign assistance, was very concerned about the allegations and co-operated fully to clear its reputation.

UN inspectors believe that they uncovered and dismantled the Iraqi nuclear weapons program before their inspections were ended in 1998.

The U.S. government insists that Iraq has tried to revive that program and cites various bits of evidence, such as reports of uranium imports and the purchase of high-strength aluminum tubes and industrial magnets that can be used in uranium enrichment machinery.

Mr. ElBaradei said: "We have to date found no evidence or plausible indication of the revival of a nuclear weapons program," despite 218 inspections at 141 sites since monitoring was revived three months ago under a new Security Council resolution.

Extensive investigation of the aluminum tubes in question confirms that they were not suitable for uranium enrichment centrifuges, he said.

And none of the declared magnets could be used to enrich uranium, he added.



© 2003 Bell Globemedia Interactive Inc. All Rights Reserved.