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THE WORLD

French Told CIA of Bogus Intelligence

The foreign spy service warned the U.S. various times before the war that there was no proof Iraq sought uranium from Niger, ex-officials say.

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PARIS — More than a year before President Bush declared in his 2003 State of the Union speech that Iraq had tried to buy nuclear weapons material in Africa, the French spy service began repeatedly warning the CIA in secret communications that there was no evidence to support the allegation.

The previously undisclosed exchanges between the U.S. and the French, described in interviews last week by the retired chief of the French counterintelligence service and a former CIA official, came on separate occasions in 2001 and 2002.

The French conclusions were reached after extensive on-the-ground investigations in Niger and other former French colonies, where the uranium mines are controlled by French companies, said Alain Chouet, the French former official. He said the French investigated at the CIA's request.

Chouet's account was "at odds with our understanding of the issue," a U.S. government official said. The U.S. official declined to elaborate and spoke only on condition that neither he nor his agency be named.

However, the essence of Chouet's account — that the French repeatedly investigated the Niger claim, found no evidence to support it, and warned the CIA — was extensively corroborated by the former CIA official and a current French government official, who both spoke on condition of anonymity.

The repeated warnings from France's Direction Generale de la Securite Exterieur did not prevent the Bush administration from making the case aggressively that Saddam Hussein was seeking nuclear weapons materials.

It was not the first time a foreign government tried to warn U.S. officials off of dubious prewar intelligence.

In the notorious "Curveball" case, an Iraqi who defected to Germany claimed to have knowledge of Iraqi biological weapons. Bush and other U.S. officials repeatedly cited Curveball's claims even as German intelligence officials argued that he was unstable and might be a fabricator.

The case of the forged documents that were used to support claims that Hussein was seeking materials in Africa launched a political controversy that continues to roil Washington.

A special prosecutor continues to investigate whether the Bush administration unmasked a covert CIA operative in a bid to discredit her husband, a former diplomat whom the CIA dispatched in February 2002 to investigate the Niger reports. The diplomat, Joseph C. Wilson IV, like the French, said he found little reason to believe the uranium story. The investigation into the leak led to the indictment of Vice President Dick Cheney's former Chief of Staff I. Lewis "Scooter" Libby on charges of obstruction of justice and perjury.

The French opposed U.S. policy on Iraq and refused to support the invasion. But whether or not that made top U.S. officials skeptical of the French report on Niger, intelligence officials from both countries said that they cooperated closely during the prewar period and continued to do so. And the French conclusions on Niger were supported by some in the CIA.

The CIA requested French assistance in 2001 and 2002 because French firms dominate the uranium business internationally and former French colonies lead the world in production of the strategic mineral.

French officials were particularly sensitive to the assertion about Iraq trying to obtain nuclear materials given the role that French companies play in uranium mining in France's former colonies.

"In France, we've always been very careful about both problems of uranium production in Niger and Iraqi attempts to get uranium from Africa," Chouet said. "After the first Gulf War, we were very cautious with that problem, as the French government didn't care to be accused of maintaining relations with Saddam in that field."

The French-U.S. communications were detailed to The Times last week by Chouet, who directed a 700-person intelligence unit specializing in weapons proliferation and terrorism.

Chouet said the cautions from his agency grew more emphatic over time as the Bush administration bolstered the case for invading Iraq by arguing that Hussein had sought to build a nuclear arsenal using uranium from Niger.

Chouet recalled that his agency was contacted by the CIA in the summer of 2001 — shortly before the attacks of Sept. 11 — as intelligence services in Europe and North America became more concerned about chatter from known terrorist sympathizers. CIA officials asked their French counterparts to check that uranium in Niger and elsewhere was secure. The former CIA official confirmed Chouet's account of this exchange.

Then twice in 2002, Chouet said, the CIA contacted the French again for similar help. By mid-2002, Chouet recalled, the request was more urgent and more specific. The CIA was asking questions about a particular agreement purportedly signed by Nigerian officials to sell 500 metric tons of uranium to Iraq.

Chouet dispatched a five- or six-man team to Niger to double-check any reports of a sale or an attempt to purchase uranium. The team found none.

Chouet and his staff noticed that the details of the allegation matched those in fraudulent documents that an Italian informant earlier had offered to sell to the French.

"We told the Americans, 'Bull - - -. It doesn't make any sense,' " Chouet said.

Chouet said the information was contained in formal cables delivered to CIA offices in Paris and Langley, Va. Those communications did not use such coarse language, he said, but they delivered the point in consistent and blunt terms.

"We had the feeling that we had been heard," Chouet said. "There was nothing more to say other than that."

The former CIA official could not confirm the specifics of this 2002 communication, but said the general conclusions matched what many in the CIA were learning at the time.

Chouet left the French government in the summer of 2002, after the center-right coalition led by President Jacques Chirac won control, forcing out top officials who had been aligned with the outgoing Socialist Francois Mitterand.

When Bush gave his State of the Union address in January 2003, citing a report from the British that Iraq had attempted to purchase uranium in Africa, other French officials were flabbergasted.

One government official said that French experts viewed the statement attributed to the British as "totally crazy because, in our view, there was no backup for this." Nonetheless, he said, the French once again launched an investigation, turning things "upside-down trying to find out what was going on."

Chouet's comments come as the FBI and the Italian government reopen investigations into the origins of the documents that surfaced in 2002 purporting to prove the Iraq-Niger link. The documents in question originally surfaced in Rome.

Before speaking with The Times last week, Chouet had told part of his story to La Repubblica, a Rome newspaper, prompting Italian investigators to resume their inquiry and seek Chouet's testimony.

In the U.S., the FBI recently reopened its inquiry into the documents in part because it had won access to new information.

Wilson, the former U.S. ambassador sent to Niger by the CIA to investigate the allegations, said he believed that his trip was inspired by the forged documents. He said the briefing he received at the CIA referred to a sales agreement between Iraq and Niger that sounded like the forged documents.

Bush attributed the African uranium information to British intelligence in his 2003 address: "The British government has learned that Saddam Hussein recently sought significant quantities of uranium from Africa."

The British government maintains that its conclusions were based not on the forged documents but on other, more reliable sources. In fact, British officials have said that they reached their conclusions long before the forged documents surfaced.

Still, Chouet said in the interview that the question from CIA officials in the summer of 2002 seemed to follow almost word for word from the documents in question. He said that an Italian intelligence source, Rocco Martino, had tried to sell the documents to the French, but that in a matter of days French analysts determined the documents had been forged.

"We thought they [the Americans] were in possession of the documents," Chouet said. "The words were very similar." The former CIA official said that in fact the U.S. had been offered the same documents in 2001 but had quickly rejected them as forgeries.

A spokeswoman for the British Embassy in Washington declined to comment on Chouet's remarks, reiterating that the British government continued to stand behind its conclusions that Iraq had sought to purchase uranium in Africa.

A British report on prewar intelligence found the Africa claims in Bush's speech to be "well-founded," noting that British suspicions on Iraq's efforts to buy uranium originated with visits in 1999 by Iraqi officials to Niger and the Congo.

Bush's assertions in his 2003 State of the Union speech had previously been made by other U.S. officials in speeches and internal documents.

On Sept. 8, 2002 — within months of the third French warning — Cheney and then-national

security advisor Condoleezza Rice spoke in dire terms of Iraq's alleged efforts to pursue nuclear materials. Rice warned: "We don't want the smoking gun to be a mushroom cloud."

Chouet, asked for his reaction to Bush's speech and the claims of his lieutenants, said: "No proof. No evidence. No indication. No sign."

White House officials scrambled to explain how the 16 words found their way into the 2003 speech when so much doubt surrounded the claims. Ultimately, then-deputy national security advisor Stephen Hadley took responsibility for allowing them to remain.

On June 17, 2003, five months after Bush's State of the Union, the CIA clarified its position on whether Iraq had sought uranium from Africa.

"Since learning that the Iraq-Niger uranium deal was based on false documents earlier this spring, we no longer believe that there is sufficient other reporting to conclude that Iraq pursued uranium from abroad," the agency said in an internal memorandum that was disclosed by the Senate Intelligence Committee.

Bush critics now say that — in light of the warnings from the French and others — the White House owes the public a better explanation.

Former Sen. Bob Graham (D-Fla.), who was chairman of the Intelligence Committee when the Niger claims first surfaced in 2002, said some officials in the U.S. State Department were also expressing doubts: "The big mystery is why did the administration, in the face of at least a very persuasive contrary view, feel the president should take the risk of stating this?"

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Hamburger and Wallsten reported from Paris and Washington, Drogin from Washington. Times staff writer Sebastian Rotella in Paris contributed to this report.

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