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WMD source 'was senior Iraqi officer'

By James Blitz and Mark Huband

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A senior Iraqi officer on active service within the country's military provided British intelligence last August with the information that Iraq could fire chemical or biological warheads within 45 minutes of Saddam Hussein giving the order, according to senior Whitehall officials.

The claim, contained in the government's dossier on Iraq's weapons of mass destruction, has become the chief test of whether ministers "duped" the British public over the need for war.

Whitehall officials in two departments said last night the evidence of the 45-minute capability had come from a serving Iraqi officer with a record for providing reliable data over years. The information was analysed by Britain's Joint Intelligence Committee and immediately distributed to some cabinet ministers at the end of August, a few weeks before the compilation of the government's WMD dossier.

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There have been assertions that intelligence about the Iraqi capability had come via the US from an "unreliable" source, a Iraqi defector with contacts with the Iraqi opposition movement.

The new revelation came as Tony Blair denied claims that Downing Street had "doctored" the dossier, published last September, saying the allegation was "completely and totally untrue".

The prime minister refused to bow to calls from the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats for an independent judicial inquiry into the way the government had presented its intelligence assessment of Saddam Hussein's WMD before the start of the war. However, Downing Street indicated that Mr Blair would give evidence to parliament's intelligence and security committee, a cross-party body of MPs which will conduct an inquiry in private but make its report public.


Intelligence sought to find a second source for the information and was unable to do so. However, the JIC was prepared to rely on a single source because the official was a senior figure in Mr Hussein's regime, not a defector.

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Although Whitehall officials on Wednesday acknowledged that the claim about a 45-minute capability was based on its single source, they said the JIC's decision to distribute this information through official channels made it impossible to argue that the dossier had been "sexed up".

In the Commons, Mr Blair backed John Reid, the Commons leader, who had claimed "rogue elements" in the intelligence services were briefing against the government. But Mr Blair said he was convinced nobody was involved from the JIC. Whitehall sources said they were not convinced it was somebody working within the security services.

Mr Blair remained confident that chemical and biological weapons would be found in Iraq, saying that the Iraq Survey Group - made up of 1,400 UK, US and Australian officials - were only now starting their work.

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