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THREATS AND RESPONSES: THE VIEW FROM PRAGUE; PRAGUE DISCOUNTS AN IRAQI MEETING

By JAMES RISEN

The Czech president, Vaclav Havel, has quietly told the White House he has concluded that there is no evidence to confirm earlier reports that Mohamed Atta, the leader in the Sept. 11 attacks, met with an Iraqi intelligence officer in Prague just months before the attacks on New York and Washington, according to Czech officials.

Mr. Havel discreetly called Washington to tell senior Bush administration officials that an initial report from the Czech domestic intelligence agency that Mr. Atta had met with an Iraqi intelligence officer, Ahmad Khalil Ibrahim Samir al-Ani, in Prague in April 2001 could not be substantiated.

Czech officials did not say precisely when Mr. Havel told the White House to disregard the reports of the meeting, but extensive interviews with leading Czech figures make clear that he did so quietly some time earlier this year in an effort to avoid publicly embarrassing other prominent officials in his government, who had given credibility to the reports through their public and private statements in the months after the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon.

The statements by those officials, including the Czech prime minister, had helped turn the reports of a meeting between an important Al Qaeda operative and an Iraqi spy into an international issue.

When the reports of a meeting between Mr. Atta and Mr. Ani came to attention in October 2001, they appeared to provide the most direct connection yet uncovered between the Sept. 11 attacks and the government of Saddam Hussein, and they set off a debate in Washington that continues today over whether a possible war with Iraq should be considered an extension of the global war on Al Qaeda and terrorism.

For months, American intelligence and law enforcement officials have cast doubt on the reports of the Prague meeting, which proved to be based on the statements of a single informant, and last week the director of central intelligence, George J. Tenet, told Congress that his agency could find no evidence to confirm that the meeting took place.

The White House has generally been cautious about using the reports of the Prague meeting to help make the case for war with Iraq. Yet the Prague meeting has remained a live issue with other proponents of military action against Iraq, both in and out of the government.

The disclosure of Mr. Havel's decision to inform the Bush administration that it should ignore the reports of a meeting comes after a year of confused and often contradictory statements from other Czech officials about the incident.

Interior Minister Stanislav Gross first gave public credence to the reports when he held a news conference in October 2001 to announce that Mr. Atta had come to Prague in April to meet with Mr. Ani, an intelligence officer who was working under diplomatic cover in the Iraqi Embassy.

More significantly, Czech officials say that Milos Zeman, then the Czech Republic's prime minister, privately informed Secretary of State Colin L. Powell about the intelligence reports, while Mr. Zeman was holding meetings in Washington in November, thus placing the credibility of the Czech government even more squarely behind the reports.

Mr. Zeman's statements, along with an assertion that Mr. Atta and Mr. Ani had met to plot an attack on the offices of Radio Free Europe in Prague, made it difficult for officials there and in Washington to easily brush aside the reports of the meeting. American counterterrorism specialists at the F.B.I. and the C.I.A. subsequently came under intense pressure to thoroughly investigate the matter.

But Czech officials who have investigated the case now say that Mr. Zeman and Mr. Gross spoke without adequately vetting the information or waiting for the Czech internal security service to substantiate the initial reports.

Officials say they also spoke without adequately consulting Mr. Havel, who was effectively excluded as others went to the press and the Bush administration. In the Czech political system, the president is the head of state, but the prime minister manages most day-to-day government affairs and is not necessarily from the same party as the president.

Mr. Havel, the playwright and former dissident who led Czechoslovakia out of Communism in the Velvet Revolution of 1989, moved carefully behind the scenes in the months after the reports of the Prague meeting came to light to try to determine what really happened, officials said. He asked trusted advisers to investigate, and they quietly went through back channels to talk with Czech intelligence officers to get to the bottom of the story. The intelligence officers told them there was no evidence of a meeting.

It was also clear they were irked that Czech political leaders had spoken out despite the caveats that had been placed on the initial report of the meeting. "I'm sure that the report was written carefully, in guarded language," a Czech leader who has reviewed the matter said.

The intelligence report of the Czech domestic intelligence agency on a possible meeting between Mr. Atta and Mr. Ani had come from a single informant in the local Arab community, and the information was treated skeptically by Czech intelligence experts because it had been provided only after the Sept. 11 attacks, after Mohamed Atta's picture had been broadcast on television and published in newspapers around the world, and even after the Czech press reported that records showed that Mr. Atta had traveled to Prague.

Officials of the intelligence service were said to be furious that Mr. Zeman had taken the information straight to the top of the American government, before they had a chance to investigate further.

After Mr. Havel's advisers reported back to him, the president told the Bush administration that reports of an Atta-Ani meeting could not be substantiated. "I think he tried to do it politely because he didn't want to embarrass anyone," a Czech leader familiar with the matter said.

Mr. Zeman declined to comment about his role in the case. Mr. Gross could not be reached, but in May he told a Czech newspaper that he stood by his initial statements about the meeting.

Today, other Czech officials say they have no evidence that Mr. Atta was even in the country in April 2001. In fact, American records indicate he was in Virginia Beach, Va., in early April. "The interior minister claims they did meet, but the intelligence people have told me that they didn't, that the meeting didn't happen," a senior official said.

The Czechs say border police records show that Mr. Atta, an Egyptian who was then living in Hamburg, Germany, did come to Prague in June 2000, after obtaining a visa late in May. Shortly after arriving in Prague on that occasion then, Mr. Atta flew to Newark. Now, some Czech and German officials say that their best explanation of why Mr. Atta came to Prague was to get a cheap airfare to the United States.

Czech officials also say they have no hard evidence that Mr. Ani was involved in terrorist activities, although the government did order his ouster in late April 2001. Those officials say that while the Iraqi was photographed outside the Radio Free Europe building, there is scant evidence that Radio Free Europe had been chosen as a target.

Czech officials say the very small Iraqi Embassy here has usually had only one intelligence officer. Iraqi intelligence has used a larger office in Vienna as a regional base for Central Europe, and Prague appears to be little more than a satellite office.

Over the years, Czech security officials also say they have never seen any other evidence that Iraqi intelligence officers stationed in Prague were involved in terrorist activities. Instead, Czech officials say

Iraqi intelligence officers here typically spend their time tracking the small community of Iraqi opposition figures, sometimes pressing them to return home. The Iraqis may also have been involved in illegal arms deals, seeking weapons and spare parts for the Iraqi military in violation of international sanctions.

Photos: Mohamed Atta, left, the operational leader in the Sept. 11 hijackings, has been traced in intelligence reports to a meeting in Prague five months before with an Iraqi embassy official, Khalil Ibrahim Samir al-Ani, right. (Associated Press)(pg. A9)