

Cheney: Weapons Search Needs Time

In Interview, Vice President Also Repeats Assertion of Al Qaeda-Iraq Link

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Washington Post Staff Writers
Friday, January 23, 2004; Page A14

Vice President Cheney said investigators in Iraq may still find weapons of mass destruction, reviving the possibility after nine months of searches.

In his State of the Union address Tuesday, President Bush made no assertion that chemical, biological or nuclear weapons would be found in Iraq. Instead, he referred to "weapons-of-mass-destruction-related program activities."

But Cheney, asked in an interview with National Public Radio whether the administration has given up on finding the weapons Bush has alleged over the last year that Iraq possessed, said, "No, we haven't." He added: "We still don't know the whole extent of what they did have. It's going to take some additional considerable period of time in order to look in all the cubbyholes and ammo dumps and all the places in Iraq where you'd expect to find something like that."

Cheney's assertion came even though investigators failed to find such weapons during visits to the sites where the administration had said they would be found. Investigators have found Iraq's weapons program to be in a primitive state.

In the NPR interview, broadcast yesterday, Cheney also repeated allegations that semi-trailers found in Iraq were part of a weapons program. He called the trailers "conclusive evidence" that Saddam Hussein "did in fact have programs for weapons of mass destruction."

Others have not viewed the evidence as conclusive. A CIA report on the trucks said their "most likely use" was for biological weapons; other scientists who have studied them in Baghdad, including the late British scientist David Kelly, doubted that finding.

In the NPR interview, Cheney repeated the administration's assertion that Iraq had ties to al Qaeda, but he said the contacts "would be limited to very few people handled on a very narrow track and not widely discussed or known about in his own government."

In the NPR interview, Cheney nevertheless said "there's overwhelming evidence" of an Iraq-al Qaeda connection, citing "documents indicating that a guy named Abdul Rahman Yasin, who was part of the team who attacked the World Trade Center in 1993, when he arrived back in Iraq was put on the payroll and provided a house, safe harbor and sanctuary." Cheney added, "I'm very confident there was an established relationship there." It was the second time in recent days Cheney asserted such a link. In an interview with the Rocky Mountain News posted on Jan. 9, Cheney repeated an allegation that there may have been a link between one of the Sept. 11, 2001, hijackers and Iraq.

"On the 9/11 question, we've never had confirmation one way or another," he said. "We did have reporting that was public, that came out shortly after the 9/11 attack, provided by the Czech government, suggesting there had been a meeting in Prague between Mohamed Atta, the lead hijacker, and a man named al-Ani [Ahmed Khalil Ibrahim Samir al-Ani], who was an Iraqi intelligence official in Prague, at the embassy there, in April of '01, prior to the 9/11 attacks. . . . That was the one that possibly tied the two together to 9/11."

An FBI investigation concluded that Atta was apparently in Florida at the time of the alleged meeting, and the CIA has always doubted it took place. Czech authorities first mentioned the alleged meeting to U.S.

officials in October 2001, but have since said they no longer are certain Atta was there. The U.S. military has captured the Iraqi intelligence officer who was supposed to have met Atta but has not obtained confirmation from him.

Bush said in September that "we've had no evidence that Saddam Hussein was involved with September the 11th."

Also in the Rocky Mountain News interview, Cheney referred those seeking a general relationship between Iraq and al Qaeda to a Weekly Standard article "based on an assessment that was done by the Department of Defense and forwarded to the Senate intelligence committee some weeks ago." The November article asserted that an Oct. 27 memo from the Pentagon said Osama bin Laden and Hussein had an operational relationship from the early 1990s to 2003.

When the article was published, the Pentagon said it was "inaccurate" that the Defense Department confirmed new information to the Senate committee about an Iraq-al Qaeda link, and that the memo was "not an analysis of the substantive issue of the relationship between Iraq and al Qaeda, and it drew no conclusions." The Pentagon also said the leak of the document was "deplorable and may be illegal."

Cheney, in the NPR interview, said intelligence pointing to stockpiles of anthrax and VX nerve agent came from the United Nations. "This isn't something we dreamed up or something that was thought about at the CIA," he said. "Everybody believed it, and had good reason to believe it."

The United Nations said Iraq had not accounted for the destruction of its anthrax and VX agents but did not assert that Iraq still had such stockpiles. Iraq said it had disposed of the weapons but did not say how.

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