

Serb Secrets Aid UN in Iraq

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US army visit gathers vital intelligence on Belgrade's long association with Baghdad.

Belgrade last week handed over full details of its decades-long military cooperation with Baghdad to boost United Nations weapons inspectors' current investigation in Iraq.

Five United States army officials toured Serbia last week, accompanied by representatives from the Yugoslav defence ministry, to speak to companies and state-owned military complexes about the weapons trade.

As well as adding to NATO and the Pentagon's intelligence, the information collected will be of great importance to the UN inspectors currently searching Iraq for evidence of illegal weapons installations.

Serbia's deputy prime minister Nebojsa Covic told IWPR that the US experts had been invited to the country following the Jugoimport arms scandal, when the state-owned factory and Republika Srpska's Orao Aviation Institute were discovered to have given military assistance to Saddam Hussein's regime in defiance of UN embargoes.

"That had to be investigated. We should be completely serious and take care to be completely honest," said Covic.

After the scandal broke in October, Belgrade handed Washington its entire federal military intelligence archive, which is believed to contain information on installations and personnel vital to Saddam Hussein's war machine.

Last week, the American experts visited Jugoimport and several key factories involved in the manufacture and trade of military equipment - Prva Iskra Baric, Sloboda (Cacak), Zastava (Kragujevac), Milan Blagojevic (Lucane), Prvi Partizan (Uzice) and Krusik (Valjevo).

The US officials were furnished with copies of each firm's complete business records, detailing their contact with Baghdad over the decades.

Stanoje Biocanin, general director of Prva Iskra, told Blic daily last week, "They were interested in exactly what had been delivered - and what we had offered - to Baghdad. Everything boiled down to whether Iraq had the capability of producing chemical weapons.

"They also wanted individual reports from people who had visited Baghdad, and I told them I had personally been there to inaugurate a facility known as KOL 1."

KOL 1, situated in the Iraqi town of Mahmudia, is an industrial complex built by Yugoslav experts in the Eighties at a cost of around one billion US dollars. While it is primarily designed to produce gunpowder and explosives, there is a theory that it could be capable of making components for chemical weapons.

Yugoslav foreign affairs minister Goran Svilanovic said on November 28, "We are preparing a detailed report for the UN, which will be urgently sent to chief weapons inspector Hans Blix.

"Also, in cooperation with the US government, we are trying to establish what was happening in the years when our country was under sanctions, and when proper control mechanisms were not respected."

Belgrade has also accepted Britain's offer of advice and help in the implementation of a new control system for military trade.

Svilanovic explained the UK method involves tracking arms sales. Thus, when Serbia makes a deal in future, the Yugoslav embassies in the destination countries will have to confirm that the weapons arrived safely - and have not been diverted to a third country under UN sanctions.

Belgrade sees these measures as the final chapter in the Jugoimport-Orao affair, which caused huge embarrassment to a government working hard to rehabilitate the country after the fall of Milosevic.

Prime Minister Zoran Djindjic's government - which had had no knowledge of the illicit trade - launched an investigation immediately after the first allegations surfaced. It soon emerged that corrupt defence ministry officials had conspired with the powerful weapons dealers to continue trading with Iraq following Milosevic's fall.

Several Jugoimport and defence ministry officials were dismissed and the government assumed full control of weapons exports. It later transpired that due to official negligence, Milosevic-era contracts with Baghdad had never been cancelled.

Former Serb secret police official Stevan Nikcevic has now been entrusted with the task of leading Jugoimport out of the scandal and severing all ties between the firm and Iraq.

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