U.N. Weapon Inspectors Gave Briefings on Iraq: Talks With Military Officials Violate Formal Policy Of Special Commission
By Daniel Pearl

London-- United Nations weapons inspectors routinely have give briefings to military officials in their home countries after returning from Iraq missions, according to U.S. and British former inspectors and others who have attended such briefings.

The briefings have fed claims the U.S. and Britain are making about Iraqi weapons programs, as the allies argue for a tough stand against Iraq. But the briefings run against the official policy of the agency conducting the inspections, the U.N. Special Commission, or Unscom, which tells its inspectors to keep all information confidential and tries to keep a strict separation between inspection teams and the government supplying them.

In addition, the debriefings could help fuel Iraqi claims that U.S. and other inspectors spy for their governments, a charge U.S. and Unscom officials have denied.

The briefings are "a touchy subject" these days for Unscom, says one U.S. inspector who gave briefings to Pentagon researchers and U.S. arms-control officials. He said sharing information is a "fine balance," with Unscom insisting on independence but the Pentagon asking seemingly routine questions.

Routine Briefings Are Denied

Richard Butler, head of Unscom, yesterday denied there are routine briefings. While acknowledging he has no way of knowing what inspectors do when they return to their employers, he said, "Overwhelmingly, people have adhered to the terms of their agreements."

Pentagon spokesman Kenneth Bacon said, "It is my understanding that Unscom exchanges information with governments on a case-by-case basis if it benefits Unscom's mission." A British Government spokesman said, "There is a good deal of consultation that goes on when they [the inspectors] come back to their capitals," but then added, "We don't have any contact that breaches their contract with Unscom."

But Ronald G. Manley, a British Unscom inspector until 1994, says the confidentiality agreement was ignored. "Every time I returned home I was wheeled in" to the Ministry of Defense, he said. "The government is paying for you, so they feel they have the right."

He says the practice raised concerns within Unscom because the government that gets the briefing might reach a starker conclusion about Iraqi weapons programs then Unscom itself had reached. The Organization for Prohibition of Chemical Weapons, the Hague-based agency enforcing an international chemical-weapons treaty, which Mr. Manley helps run, is hoping to avoid confidentiality breaches by hiring its own inspector.
U.S. Says It Already Had Targets

Asked whether U.S. might use information gleaned from Unscom in planning air strikes against Iraq, Mr. Bacon, the Pentagon spokesman, said, "It is clear that we had a lot of targets in Iraq long before Unscom was created." Inspectors have been barred from many of the sites that would likely come under attack, including presidential complexes and some security and intelligence headquarters.

What's more, the U.S. "has more than ample resources" to identify targets on its own, using satellite imagery, says Tim Travan, an Iraq specialist at the International Institute for Strategic Studies in London, a think tank. the U.S. also has access to formal reports the inspection teams have filed with the U.N. Security Council.

But Mr. Travan, who previously worked in New York for Unscom, says there is plenty of evidence that doesn't make its way into formal reports. Some inspectors are using their experience to help their governments fight political battles over how to deal with Iraq. Russian and French inspector, for example, have been quoted in news reports criticizing their U.S. colleagues.

Inspector Talks to Think Tank

Meanwhile, the U.N.'s lead biological-weapons inspector, Richard Spertzel, told the Washington Institute of Near East Policy, a think tank, that there was "tantalizing information" that Iraq may be operating a secret biological-weapons plant. Mr. Butler, who fielded protests from several Security Council members Thursday about the remark, says he explained that Dr. Spertzel had also noted the information wasn't complete. Mr. Butler says Dr. Spertzel had given a similar briefing to the Security Council, and didn't "to my knowledge" brie the Pentagon directly."

Dr. Spertzel, a retired researcher from the U.S. Army's biological-weapons research center at Fort Detrick, Md., wasn't available for comment yesterday.

An Iraqi official said yesterday that Iraq has protested "flagrant violations" of the confidentiality agreement, including American Unscom inspectors' telephoning their offices in Washington directly from Baghdad to pass on information, using U.S.-supplied phones. Rolf Ekeus, head of Unscom from 1991 until last July, confirms the incidents, but says he put a stop to them quickly because "it was very seriously harming the credibility of our operation." Mr. Ekeus, now Swedish ambassador to the U.S., says, "Washington was not happy, but after a while they understood."

Thomas E. Ricks in Qatar contributed to this article.