New Doubts Surface Over Claims That Plant Produced Nerve Gas
By Daniel Pearl

The American designer and Italian supplier of a pharmaceuticals factory in Sudan cast further doubt on U.S. allegations that the plant, destroyed last week by U.S. cruise missiles, was a well-guarded nerve-gas plant.

Dino Romanatti, whose Milan company supplies powders that generic-drug companies form into pills, said in an interview he was given the run of the plant during long visits this February and June. He said the managers of the privately owned plant even left him and his technical staff alone in the factory when they worked late, and gave them the keys to the main office to make international phone calls.

"I didn't see any equipment -- and there wasn't even the space -- for any production of chemicals," Mr. Romanatti said. Besides, he added, "the availability of tools in the factory was close to zero. You couldn't get a piece of steel, a screw, a saw. To imagine a plant that makes chemical weapons is absolutely incredible."

Also skeptical is Henry R. Jobe, a retired pharmaceuticals consultant who designed the plant, known as the Ashifa factory, and others in the Middle East. Mr. Jobe, while acknowledging that he last worked on the plant before it opened in 1996, said there was no outside interference in the plant's initial choice of equipment, which didn't include any of the laboratory equipment that experts say is needed to make nerve agents.

"They pretty well did what I recommended" to set up the factory, said Mr. Jobe, reached at his home in Southern Pines, North Carolina. He also said he didn't get any inquiries from U.S. officials about the plant until Thursday, when a U.S. Central Intelligence Agency official phoned and asked questions about the plant's equipment.

U.S. Says It Has Evidence

The U.S. continues to insist it had firm evidence the Ashifa plant was making a key chemical for the manufacture of VX, a deadly nerve agent. The alleged evidence, compiled hastily as the U.S. searched for targets to retaliate for embassy bombings in Kenya and Tanzania, includes a soil sample taken from outside the factory, and telephone conversations among plant officials, Iraqi chemical-weapon experts and associates of Osama bin Laden, the Saudi-born Islamic fundamentalist suspected in the embassy bombings and accused by the U.S. of seeking chemical weapons.

But international skepticism persists, in part because the U.S. has to back away from three initial allegations: that there was no evidence the plant made pharmaceuticals, that the plant was government-run, and that Mr. bin Laden had a financial interest in the plant.
"The story keeps changing too much," said one Arab diplomat. Some pro-American Arab officials believe Sudan may well be making chemical weapons, but that the U.S. chose the wrong target. Britain, which withdrew its United Kingdom embassy staff from Sudan Thursday, continues to support the destruction of the factory, but now acknowledges it has relied on U.S. assurances rather than first-hand evidence of chemical production.

A Sudanese official said Thursday that if the United Nations declines Sudan's request to investigate the site, Sudan will assemble its own team of European weapons specialists to do so. Sudan hasn't signed the international chemical-weapons treaty, but the Organization for the Prevention of Chemical Weapons, which implements it, would consider any Sudanese request for a special inspection, said Donato Kiniger-Passigli, spokesman for the Hague-based organization.

Some chemical-weapons experts are uncomfortable with the apparent reliance of the U.S. on a single, secretly taken soil sample, in part because the sample could have been tainted by whoever provided it. Also, the substance the U.S. says it detected -- O-ethylmethylphosphonothioic acid, or O-EMPTA -- is difficult to isolate when it is in soil, according to the Organization for the Prevention of Chemical Weapons. One expert at the group said a laboratory told to look for O-EMPTA could get a false positive result if there were pesticide traces in the soil. "To convict somebody, we would have to have at least two results out of three" from different independent laboratories, he said.

Dr. Jan Medema, manager of the Netherlands' TNO Prins Maurits Laboratory, said the U.S. has two strong laboratories for detection of VX precursors. Still, he said, "Their case would be so much stronger if they were willing to have an independent laboratory make its own analysis." Dr. Medema added that it is highly unlikely that a plant's ventilation system or underground waste-disposal system would allow O-EMPTA to get into surface soil outside the plant. More likely, he said, is that the Sudanese wanted to get rid of some already made O-EMPTA and poured it directly into the soil, and "somebody saw that and took a sample."

A spokesman for Aldrich Chemical, a Milwaukee unit of Sigma-Aldrich Corp., says his company makes very small quantities of O-EMPTA that are sold to research laboratories that might want it for scientific studies. But the spokesman says he didn't know of any company that used the chemical for manufacturing products.

He also noted, however, that all one needs to make EMPTA is the raw materials, a recipe and basic glassware of the sort found in a college lab. "A good, competent chemist with reasonable glassware and access to the materials could make a nerve gas, no question," says Aldrich spokesman Clint Lane.

Ties to Sudan Regime

Experts say small amounts of O-EMPTA could be made in a small space, using the laboratory equipment typically found in a pharmaceuticals company that develops or tests the powders
used as active ingredients. The Ashifa factory bought the powders from outside, though Mr. Jobe, the American designer, said the founders did talk of producing some on their own eventually.

The Ashifa plant was launched by a Sudanese engineer, Bashir Hassan Bashir, and a Saudi shipper, Salem Baaboud, both of whom deny the U.S. claims. Mr. Bashir said he has no government connections, though Sudanese dissidents describe him as a figure closely tied to the regime. He said the plant's funding included loans of $6 million from local banks, $6 million from an east African development agency, and $1.4 million from a local development agency, and that it had no connection to a government "military industrial complex" three kilometers away. The U.S. alleges the Ashifa factory is part of the complex.

Mr. Bashir said the partners sold the plant for about $32 million on March 30 to a company controlled by Salaheldin Idris, a Sudanese-born Saudi businessman. Mr. Bashir said he didn't believe the new company, called Ginawa, had other participants, but that a Sudanese chemical engineer related to Mr. Idris did help him look over the site. Mr. Romanatti, the Italian supplier, says neither the management nor the management style changed after the sale.

Mr. Bashir acknowledged the plant had some Iraqis as employees, including one of the technicians, and that Ashifa entered one pharmaceuticals contract with Iraq, but said the plant otherwise had nothing to do with Iraq. The U.N. has confirmed that it approved a contract last January, under the oil-for-food program, for Iraq to buy 100,000 liters of veterinary pharmaceuticals from Ashifa for $199,000. In July, the factory requested an extension to complete the order.

Robert Langreth contributed to this article