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Searching Iraq

With the possibility of war ahead, U.N. inspectors look for illegal weapons in Iraq

Long caravans of official United Nations Jeeps have been winding their way in and around Iraq's capital, Baghdad, for the last two weeks. The U.N. officials riding inside have been working around the clock, visiting factories, medical labs, government headquarters and even the private palaces of Iraq's president, Saddam Hussein. The officials are highly trained weapons inspectors on a search for illegal weapons that U.S. leaders believe are hidden in Iraq.

This is no simple game of hide-and-seek. Finding illegal weapons would have explosive consequences for Iraq and the rest of the world. Already, thousands of U.S., British and other troops are positioning themselves in countries along Iraq's border. If illegal weapons are found, it will almost certainly mean war.

Is Iraq Hiding Weapons?

The U.S. and Great Britain claim they have information showing that Iraq has been developing "weapons of mass destruction." Such chemical, germ and nuclear weapons have the power to kill thousands of people at once. Under an international agreement signed after the 1991 Persian Gulf War, Iraq was forbidden to have these terrible weapons.

Although Iraq denies having the weapons, the U.N. voted last month to send inspectors to search the country. The U.N. Security Council, in an official statement, said that Iraq must give the inspectors full access to all parts of the country. It also gave Iraq a December 8 deadline to provide a complete list of all of its weapons of mass destruction.

"That declaration must be credible and complete," President George Bush said last week. "Any delay, deception or defiance will prove Saddam Hussein has rejected the path of peace."

The report had not yet been submitted when TFK went to press, but Iraq is expected to stick to its story. "We have no weapons of mass destruction," said General Hussam Mohammed Amin, who was in charge of writing the declaration to the U.N.

Once the U.N. inspectors have the report, they will compare it to their findings on the ground in Iraq. Weapons inspectors have been in Iraq before. After the Gulf war, when Iraq agreed to get rid of its dangerous weapons, U.N. inspectors were sent in to make sure that the country was keeping its promise. But inspectors were not given access to many places where weapons could have been stored.

A Tough Inspection

The new U.N. resolution calls for inspections to pick up where inspectors left off in 1998. But this time, they will have unrestricted access. The work will be done by almost 300 trained specialists from 48 countries.

Inspectors will be looking everywhere, including underground. The team is equipped with devices that can detect chemicals used in weapons of mass destruction. The inspectors must report what they find to the U.N. by February 21.

On the Brink of War

If Iraq fails to cooperate or the inspectors find hidden weapons, President Bush will likely order an attack on Iraq. He says he favors a change in Iraq's regime, or leadership, if the country is breaking U.N. rules.

Opinion polls show that 58% of Americans would support such an attack. Still, many are speaking out against it. A big antiwar rally is scheduled in Washington, D.C., this week. "There are other ways to deal with [Hussein] besides bombing," says peace activist Elke Heitmeyer. "Wars will only create more violence."

The U.N. inspectors are well aware of what's at stake. They have more than 1,000 sites to search as the world waits for their report. It may be weeks before the U.S. decides what to do about Iraq.

By Ritu Upadhyay