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(To be read in continuation of my earlier article titled "CIA: Sinned Against Or Sinning?" at www.saag.org [1])

President George Bush as well as Prime Minister Tony Blair have ordered an official enquiry into the reasons why contrary to what the US and the British intelligence agencies had reported before their invasion of Iraq about the presence of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) in Iraq, no such weapons have so far been found by the Iraq Survey Group set up by the US to search for them.

2. While the British enquiry is to be limited to intelligence reporting before the war on the presence of WMD, the US enquiry is to be much more comprehensive. The bipartisan commission set up by Bush would not only examine the pre-war reporting by the US intelligence on this subject, but would also evaluate the capability of the intelligence to monitor and detect proliferation of WMD in the world as a whole.

3. By long-observed tradition as well as under their code of conduct, British intelligence officers refrain from reacting in public to criticism of their performance. As such, till the report of the enquiry commission comes out, one has no means of knowing their version of what transpired before the war.

4. US intelligence is not shackled by such tradition or code of conduct. George Tenet, Director of the CIA and ,concurrently, Director, Central Intelligence, and his senior officers have been talking in public about their pre-war reporting. From their statements, two tentative conclusions emerge:

* Firstly, while the US intelligence did report about Iraq having a WMD capability, they never said that the threat from Iraq's actual or potential WMD capability was imminent. It is apparent that the decision to project the threat as imminent and hence calling for immediate regime change to pre-empt it was made at either the policy-making or political level or both, in the US as well as the UK. Intelligence agencies provide inputs for policy-making, but do not participate in policy-making, as a rule, though there have been unhealthy exceptions to this rule. There is a salutary reason for this rule. If an intelligence agency advocates or contributes to a policy, it might develop a vested interest in projecting its intelligence in such a manner as to justify the policy.

* Two, the inaccuracy in reporting to the policy-makers by the CIA's analysts arose partly from the fact that the analysts, who had no responsibility for source-running, did not have adequate idea of the background of the sources who were feeding intelligence about Iraq's WMD capability, their access to such intelligence and their credibility.

5. There are generally three types of intelligence failures:

* Zero intelligence.. A typical example was the total ignorance of the MI-6, the British external intelligence agency, about the Argentine plans for the occupation of the Falklands Islands in 1982. The Lord Franks Commission, which went into it, absolved the MI-6 of any blame for it because it did not have a presence in Argentina and hence, did not have the required capability for collecting such intelligence.

* Inadequate intelligence: Good examples would be the intelligence failures preceding the assassination of Rajiv Gandhi, former Indian Prime Minister, in 1991 and the Pakistani occupation of the Kargil heights in 1999. General intelligence, which should have alerted the policy-makers, was there, but it was not specific and precise enough to warrant effective follow-up action.

* Inaccurate intelligence. Iraq is a typical example. The inaccuracy of the intelligence collected and disseminated by the US and UK intelligence agencies was evident not only in respect of the WMD, but also of the reaction of the Iraqi people to the invasion and occupation of their country by the coalition forces led by the US. The present situation in Iraq, marked by resistance by Iraqis and acts of suicide terrorism by foreign jihadi terrorists, is a reflection of such inaccurate reporting.

6. What could be the reasons for such inaccurate reporting? The technical intelligence (TECHINT) agencies of the US and the UK could not pick up any TECHINT relating to Iraq's WMD. This could have been due to two reasons:

* Either Iraq had no WMD or had no on-going plans for WMD. Hence, there was no need for any electronic communication on this subject, which could have been intercepted by the Western agencies.

* Or, Iraq had adopted a sophisticated communication security system, which made such interception impossible.

7. The only way of making up for this zero TECHINT was through human intelligence (HUMINT). An intelligence agency collects HUMINT in two ways: Through a physical presence in the targeted country, which provides access to people having knowledge of such intelligence, and through what are called third country operations. A third country operation is raising and using a source not from the territory of the targeted country, but from the territories of other countries.

8. An intelligence agency resorts to third country operations when it has no physical presence in the targeted country or, even if it has, it is too dangerous to meet its sensitive sources in its territory due to effective surveillance by the counter-intelligence agencies of the targeted country.

9 After the Gulf war of 1991, neither the CIA nor the MI-6 had any physical presence in Iraq under the cover of either diplomats or businessmen because of the total disruption of diplomatic and commercial relations with Iraq. Their physical presence was, therefore, limited to their scientific and technical experts included in the UN inspection teams, which were considerably infiltrated by the CIA and the MI-6. Since the Saddam regime kept an effective surveillance on them, they had no means of raising sources having access to WMD-related intelligence.

10. Their HUMINT operations were, therefore, largely limited to third country operations under which they used disgruntled anti-Saddam Hussein political exiles, family members and scientists. In the absence of sources based in Iraq, who were still occupying key positions, there was no way of independently verifying the intelligence coming from such third country sources with their objectivity suspect. Political exiles are, as a rule, highly unreliable as sources of intelligence. They tend to mislead and exaggerate in order to enhance their importance in the eyes of the intelligence agencies using them.

11. In the CIA, there is a watertight division of operational and analysis officers. An operational officer recruits an agent and exploits him or her for the collection of HUMINT. He has no responsibility for analysing their produce. Since the performance of operational officers is evaluated on the basis of the usable and actionable intelligence furnished by their sources, they tend to exaggerate the credibility and access of their sources while forwarding their reports to the analysis officers.

12. The analysis officers analyse the source reports as received from the operations division and forward them to the policy-makers with their comments and analysis regarding the acceptability of the intelligence. Under the restrictive security rules, operational officers generally give only vague comments about the background of their sources.

13. While examining source reports for their acceptability, analysis officers are supposed to ask themselves the following questions: what is the position occupied by the source; would he have access to the intelligence catered during the normal course of his work; how did he get the intelligence, through direct knowledge or hearsay; is there independent corroboration from other sources; what has been his performance in the past: how many of his past reports proved to be accurate and how many inaccurate.

14. Such a detailed examination was apparently not done due to two reasons. Firstly, the forwarding comments from the operational officers were vague and did not permit answers to all these questions. As a result, they were not aware that much of the intelligence was coming from exiles who had an axe to grind against Saddam and, hence, their objectivity was in doubt.

15. Secondly, the Bush administration was impatient to take a decision to invade Iraq and bring about a regime change. Consequently, there was considerable pressure on the intelligence agencies to report more and more on the subject. The textbook rule of reporting is "verify and report". Sometimes, intelligence agencies do deviate from this rule and "report and verify". Such occasions are:

* When the report indicates an imminent threat which needs to be countered immediately . Examples: Plans for an assassination or other terrorist strikes or a planned military action by an adversary. In such cases, the intelligence agencies act on the principle that the intelligence must be presumed to be correct and acted upon as if it was correct, unless and until proved to be incorrect.

*When the country to which the agency belongs is planning for military action and the Government presses the agency to step up its reporting.

16. There is professionally nothing wrong in an intelligence agency disseminating unverified intelligence in such cases provided it adds a specific caution that the intelligence being disseminated is unverified and hence should be treated with reserve till it is verified. Under guidelines laid down by the founding fathers of the Indian intelligence agencies, they generally add this cautionary advice while disseminating unverified intelligence.

17. In the past, the British intelligence also used this cautionary advice, but it is not known whether they did so before the invasion of Iraq. One does not know what has been the laid-down rule in the US intelligence community. However, the Congressional and departmental enquiries into the case of Aldrich Ames, the Soviet/Russian mole in the CIA, exposed some instances where the agency had not followed this practice. It sent to the Pentagon source reports regarding Moscow's plans for the development of new weapons despite the suspicion of some analysts that the reports were fabrications planted on the CIA by the Soviet/Russian counter-intelligence through a mole. Gates, the

head of the Analysis Division, who subsequently became the head of the agency, and other senior officers came in for strong criticism for their serious omission.

18. What would appear to have happened in the Iraq case is:

- * The CIA's operational division found itself handicapped in raising serving officers and scientists for collecting WMD-related intelligence due to the absence of its presence in Iraq.
- * It was, therefore, forced to depend on third country operations using anti-Saddam exiles of unproved access to such intelligence and dubious reliability.
- * It forwarded their reports to the Analysis Division with inadequate comments regarding the background and access of the sources.
- * The Analysis Division disseminated such reports of questionable veracity to the policy-makers without cautioning that the intelligence has not been independently corroborated and should be treated with caution.
- * The policy-makers and the political leadership, who had already made up their mind to invade Iraq, jumped on such unverified intelligence and went to town with it in order to justify their action to the domestic and international public opinion.

19. Such use and abuse of intelligence is not something unique to the US and the UK. It keeps happening all the time in many countries, including India. One can only reduce such instances through appropriate safeguards. One cannot eliminate them totally. That is the harsh reality.

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