

June 2003

The Tuwaitha nuclear facility

Uranium and other nuclear material stored under UN control in Iraq until the fall of Saddam Hussein have been stolen and local residents are reportedly displaying symptoms of radiation poisoning. Six weeks after the occupying forces took control of the country, the US finally conceded that the UN nuclear watchdog, the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), could return to assess what has been stolen at part of one site, Tuwaitha. Yet the IAEA has been refused access to the nearby population or to other sites it wants to visit, in contravention of UN resolutions.

US officials have argued that the IAEA's mandate elsewhere in Iraq has expired, even though the latest UN resolution (1483, May 2003) clearly states that the Security Council 'intends' 'to revisit the mandate' sometime in the future and does not say it has expired. The coalition is in material breach of Resolution 1441 by refusing the IAEA '*immediate, unimpeded, unconditional, and unrestricted access to any and all, including underground, areas, facilities, buildings, equipment, records, and means of transport which they wish to inspect*'.

Tuwaitha

Built in the 1960s, the Tuwaitha Nuclear Research Facility is a complex of more than 100 buildings spread over a 35 square mile site, located 18km SSE of Baghdad. It used to be the heart of Iraq's nuclear weapons programme. Past activities at the site included several research reactors, plutonium separation and waste processing, uranium metallurgy, neutron initiator development and work on number of methods of uranium enrichment.

A nuclear reactor complex at Tuwaitha was bombed by Israel in 1981, but uranium not yet enriched for use in nuclear weapons has remained there. Following the 1991 Gulf War, the IAEA removed all known Iraqi stocks of nuclear material that could be used in weapons, in accordance with the provisions of UN Security Council Resolution 687. All other radioactive material, including uranium, remained and was checked once a year by the IAEA, under the terms of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, until December last year.

At that time, the bulk of all known nuclear material in Iraq was stored in sealed barrels at the Tuwaitha nuclear research facility. The IAEA says that in December, 500 tonnes of 'yellowcake' and 1.8 tonnes of low-enriched uranium remained at Tuwaitha, although hundreds of other highly radioactive, industrial sources were still in the country.

The Problem

When Iraq fell under US control on 9 April 2003, the occupying powers failed to properly secure Tuwaitha and other nuclear sites. Occupying forces also failed to conduct an inventory of materials at any of the sites.

Just one day later, on 10 April, the door of one storage area at Tuwaitha was found breached. US forces were requested by the IAEA to secure the storage facility sometime after April 11 but, by May 3 when US forces conducted a site survey, they were still letting scores of 'workers' enter and take whatever they liked. Seven sites associated with Iraq's nuclear program have been visited by the Pentagon's special nuclear programs' teams since the war ended, and all showed signs of 'looting'.

Residents living near Tuwaitha reportedly took barrels of nuclear material, known as 'yellowcake', and other containers because they needed them to store food, water, milk and yoghurt. They were unaware that the barrels were radioactive and toxic and that they were exposing themselves to severe risk. Witnesses report seeing people carrying containers and emptying low-level radioactive contents into the soil or local water supplies. Warning signs to the local community were limited and only written in English. Some of the looted material is now being returned to the nearby mosque where it is being stored but has not been contained.

Local doctors are concerned that people are showing signs of radiation sickness, such as bleeding and vomiting. Dr. Jaafar Nasser Suhayb, who runs a nearby clinic, said that over a five-day period he treated about 20 patients from the neighborhood near Tuwaitha for similar symptoms: shortness of breath; nausea; severe nosebleeds; and itchy rashes. Suhayb is worried that the residents are suffering from radiation poisoning because several of the symptoms are consistent with those of acute radiation syndrome.

Since April, the IAEA has been raising concerns about environmental contamination and the health and safety of people living near the nuclear sites (1). The Agency has been demanding that its radiation exposure experts be allowed access to the area. On 21 May, after several weeks of delay, the US finally agreed that the IAEA could return to Iraq but only with a severely limited mandate - to make an inventory of material remaining at one part of the Tuwaitha facility. It has not been granted permission to assess the human and environmental impacts around this site or elsewhere in the country, nor to examine the other six nuclear sites where 'looting' is reported to have taken place.

The Washington-based Nuclear Disablement Team, a collective of US Government agencies, claims the material from Tuwaitha poses little or no danger to people and cannot be converted into an effective 'dirty' bomb, even though caesium and other highly radioactive materials may be missing. It claims that radiation levels are no more than double the dosage every human absorbs daily. US forces are, however, buying back barrels that used to contain yellow cake at \$3 per barrel and reports of radiation sickness continue.

Greenpeace has gone to Iraq with a small, specialist team to examine the local environment and to assess the extent of any nuclear contamination. The team will take samples of soil and water for laboratory analysis and conduct on-site monitoring with specialist radiation detection equipment. While the extent of the

Greenpeace radiological survey will not be comprehensive, it will provide some idea of the true level of risk to the people of the area and to the environment.

Greenpeace is calling for a full assessment of the situation at Tuwaita and other nuclear sites in Iraq:

1. The occupying powers must allow the IAEA to remain in Iraq with an unrestricted mandate to test as well as document all nuclear sites.
2. The occupying powers must allow the IAEA to oversee an urgent medical and environmental assessment of the impact of the radioactive material that has spread in the local community – a practice that would be standard in any other country and circumstance.
3. A hunt for all the industrial radioactive isotopes in Iraq must be conducted urgently – these are all potential dirty bombs.

11/4/2003 [IAEA letter of Concern about Nuclear Materials in Iraq](#)
1973 [IAEA safeguards agreement with Iraq](#)