

Spies close in on Saddam's ailing terror mastermind

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By Richard Miniter, Baghdad

AMERICAN and British intelligence are in secret negotiations to seize Saddam Hussein's right-hand man. General Izzat Ibrahim al-Douri, Saddam's former deputy, is believed to be at the pinnacle of a pyramid of terrorists, mercenaries and supporters of the old regime waging war on allied forces in Iraq.

Exclusive interviews with Paul Bremer, who runs the US-led coalition provisional authority, Dr David Kay, head of the Iraqi survey group that is searching for Saddam's weapons, and senior military and intelligence officers in Iraq have revealed that the Americans have stepped up their efforts to seize al-Douri and stem the flow of terrorist attacks.

The hunt for al-Douri, number six on the list of America's 55 most wanted and who is reported to have suffered from leukaemia and heart problems, has intensified as the insurgency has grown in the past two weeks. The number of attacks has grown to 33 a day, compared with 15 daily in September. The Americans believe they have leverage.

"Al-Douri is about to die. His supporters are begging us for treatment," said Colonel Steven Boltz, a senior US army intelligence officer in Baghdad.

The Iraqi general has announced his terms: medical treatment, a full pardon for any crimes against humanity committed in Iraq or Kuwait and a firm promise that he will not be extradited to Kuwait.

The Americans were not willing to arrange a deal that would favour him, but discussions were opened through a Kurdish member of the Iraqi governing council and are now being pursued directly with US and British intelligence officers.

"Al-Douri would be a major get," said Kay. "He would know where the weapons of mass destruction are hidden, where Saddam is."

at his commanding officer and then said simply: "Yes."

Following the capture or killing of most of Saddam's senior officials, including his sons, Qusay and Uday, the loss of al-Douri would not only further isolate the ousted dictator but would also remove his key link with the financiers of the attacks on allied forces in Iraq.

Bremer said the mounting attacks on allied forces and Iraqi police were motivated by money, not ideology. More than three-quarters of direct and indirect attacks on allied forces were paid for, he said.

Al-Douri is likely to be using cash from more than \$ 1billion looted by Saddam loyalists from the Iraqi Central Bank. According to an intelligence source, he is believed to be in charge of those

funds and therefore of a network of about 2,500 local militants, plus perhaps 1,000 foreign fighters, drawn from the ranks of Al-Qaeda and Ansar al-Islam, an Islamist terror group operating in Kurdish territory.

In the wider hunt, Kay insisted that the search for weapons of mass destruction was going well. "Contrary to what you read in the press, senior detainees are talking," Kay said -and they are providing leads on terrorists, foreign fighters, future attacks and chemical weapons. He revealed that America had built a state-of-the-art base to interrogate prisoners near Baquba, north of Baghdad.

Two top Iraqi scientists, codenamed Charlie and Alpha, are helping the coalition to learn more about Iraq's anthrax programme, Kay said. The Iraqis had made shocking innovations in the milling and drying processes needed to weaponise anthrax. "Almost every week there is a new discovery that boggles your mind," Kay said.

He had recently learnt that Saddam had paid the North Koreans a \$ 10m deposit for long-range missiles that could be adapted to carry chemical or biological weapons. Apparently the missiles were never delivered but North Korea kept the money.

Sabotage by Iraqi intelligence agents during the fall of Baghdad and a shortage of translators with intelligence clearance have slowed the search for Saddam's weapons. The Iraqi survey group has uncovered "more than 9A miles of documents" relating to weapons of mass destruction and most still have not been translated, Kay explained. A lack of translators also hampers some interrogations with Iraqi scientists.

Some of the best weapons sources appear to have been the casualties of war. The head of Saddam's nuclear enrichment programme was accidentally shot dead at a US military checkpoint last spring, Kay said.

Bremer blamed Syria for acting as a conduit for foreign terrorists, mostly Al-Qaeda, to attack allied forces: "We've got rat lines running from Sudan and Yemen through Damascus and across the Syrian border into Iraq. It is pretty hard to imagine that Syrian intelligence doesn't know this is going on."

Closing the Iraq-Syria border is proving difficult, even though America has deployed more troops and unmanned aerial vehicles. "We're sitting down pretty hard on the Syrian border," Bremer said, adding that foreign fighters still slipped across the desert frontier. "We will have open borders for a long time. It is just a fact."

Bremer said that his personal goal was to transfer authority to an elected sovereign government by the end of 2004.

Meanwhile, terrorist attacks are expected to continue. US intelligence believes that last month's bombing of the Red Cross headquarters was unintentional and that the actual target was an Iraqi police station some 100 yards down the road.