

The Path towards Strengthened Safeguards: Experiences in Iraq, South Africa, and North Korea

This video series is a collection of dialogues centered on the immense role played by the IAEA, and in particular how the Agency supports nuclear nonproliferation through the practice of safeguards. This current update is a chronicle of events during the 1990s, Iraq, South Africa, and North Korea, that led to the development of the Additional Protocol.

7.15 Iraq and Illicit Procurement

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Rich: There was a decision taken fairly early on in the inspection reports to publish the names of companies whose equipment was found in Iraq. The equipment was there not under export controls. And that was very controversial at the time. But I think as time went along, I think it played a role in gaining assistance from states as information was collected and clarification was needed. I remember several representatives of those companies and countries coming to Vienna and being very upset. But I think it was the right decision.

Jacques: I would say that was when the decision was taken in 91, but what I can emphasize on is definitely the importance of getting commercial information from the source, from the company, to understand a past program. But also, and that is one of the key challenges of safeguards today, to see early warnings of what could be a developing program. As far as Iraq was concerned, we, as part of this crazy amount of information we got, pretty much every single piece of equipment that was identified in the field, either as having been used, or having the capability to support nuclear activities, were recorded.

By recorded I mean in detail from the model to the serial number, and everything that could allow to identify precisely that unique item. Then we would go back to the company through the state system, writing individually to every single manufacturer or trader identified, in order to understand when the deal had happened. But above all, was there any other type of equipment or other equipment of the same type anywhere sent to Iraq at some point in time. So from the field observation we would be able to get the response from the supporting countries, obtain from their companies, that we had found one, but there may be five items that had been sold to Iraq at some point in time. The immediate feedback would be for us to go back to Iraq and say, you have this one, you know you have these four others, where are they? That was a permanent loop.

Having not been there the first few months, I didn't know there was the need for this arm twist of some counterparts. But after I joined the Agency, this was something that worked extremely well. I would even say at the time of going to the second Gulf War in 2002 we were getting information from companies because there was this whole assumption that Iraq was bursting sanctions and that there was a permanent flow of equipment that could support the resumption of a program. We had started at the time to approach key companies including and above all those which had, or the daughters of those that had, fed Iraq in the 80's, and tried to understand if something was going on. We were also trying to understand if there were networks that would support an indirect export to Iraq. This is where we developed the concept of what we call today the outreach to companies to try to obtain the early warning signs that would help us prevent, rather than address this crisis.

Rich: Uncovering that whole, very convoluted complicated ways that they were able to procure things, was a tremendous challenge because it takes a very circuitous route. I remember the winding machines that were used to produce the composite rotors that were part of the Iraqi's development program for centrifuge enrichment – that winding machine was sold to the Iraqi and was on its way to Iraq when it was stopped by the sanctions. Its resting place at the time when we discovered it was in a warehouse down the road here just a couple kilometers. So there was a very interesting... the winding machine was in Austria at the time of the sanctions. It was bought by an Austrian company at a very cheap price, because obviously it wasn't going to go any further. It was that cheap, I don't think they had any plan for it. The samples of the resin from that machine exactly matched the resin from the rotors we confiscated in Iraq.

Jacques: There was another winding machine that we destroyed actually during the time of the absence of inspection during 1998 to 2002, that had a very complex trip. It was destroyed in neighboring country of Iraq, it had started in Europe, it had gone through several routes, including via Asia. So that's something – understanding the phenomenon of trade related to clandestine proliferation is something where we have tried in the department to develop competence. The urgency to develop this competence [was seen] when some of us landed in Libya in 2003, and we discovered that in a country which had been demoted as a proliferation threat because it was not capable to develop an indigenous program, had made progress in developing a program. Because if you had the right checkbook, people are ready to sell anything for some greed. So that's definitely something, if I may divert from the Iraq topic, but it's one of my key lines of concern, and communication these days, that there is still in the nuclear proliferation area too much compartmentalization between safeguards community and the export control community, and the security community.

These are three communities that should work far better together – that is a lesson from Iraq topped by my Libyan experience.