

Accounts Differ on Role Of Bombed Iraqi Factory

Contractor: Plant Built to Make Baby Food

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Near the end of the first week of allied bombing of Iraq, a nondescript building in a Baghdad industrial park was heavily damaged by U.S. air attacks. Iraqi officials said it was the only factory in the country that made infant formula, and had no military purpose whatsoever. They took CNN reporter Peter Arnett to the plant and let him film the damage, and Arnett brought Iraq's accusation to the outside world on Jan. 23.

Later that day, however, Air Force Lt. Col. Mike Gallagher told reporters in Saudi Arabia that "this facility . . . has military guards around it, barbed-wire fence; it has a military garrison outside. And numerous sources have indicated that the facility is associated with biological warfare production."

In Washington, Gen. Colin L. Powell, chairman of the Joint

Chiefs of Staff, said, "It was a biological weapons facility, of that we are sure."

Yet in subsequent press accounts and interviews this week with The Washington Post, the French contractor who built the factory in the late 1970s, said it was constructed as an infant formula factory, and that the equipment could not have been used to make "chemical" products.

At the same time, New Zealand technicians who have visited it repeatedly said they saw it "actually canning milk powder" as recently as last May, and have raised other questions about parts of the U.S. account.

Three administration officials, asked this week about the New Zealand and French reports, offered inconsistent explanations of the plant's operations.

A White House official said
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