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Investigate, Don't Incapacitate

By Tom Lantos

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Since the end of January, when an Iraqi newspaper alleged that a senior U.N. official had taken bribes from Saddam Hussein, the United Nations has been the target of unsubstantiated allegations involving potential mismanagement, unethical behavior and collusion with Hussein's despicable regime. The notion that a high-level U.N. official could have been on Baghdad's payroll is sickening, if true, and it must be investigated.

That being said, it has been just as sickening to see that longtime haters of the United Nations are using the bribery charge and other unproven allegations to discredit the world body when the case against it is far from clear. This campaign of slander threatens great harm to U.S. interests because it is aimed at undermining the United Nations' ability to help us in Iraq.

Based on my preliminary review of the oil-for-food program, it appears that the United Nations took action to prevent some of the abuses of which it is being accused, and that much responsibility for the problems that beset the program lies with the members of the Security Council, including our own government.

We know that U.N. officials raised concerns about possible Iraqi fraud in oil-for-food contracts as far back as early 2001, when Secretary General Kofi Annan issued a report warning that Hussein had begun to implement a system of surcharges on sales of oil under the program. Annan's reports led to reforms in the program. We also know that some U.N. officials tried to halt Hussein's scheme to extract kickbacks from companies seeking to sell goods under the program.

Although the Security Council did not give the U.N. Secretariat oversight authority, U.N. officers worked to hold up overpriced contracts by demanding that missions that submitted them on behalf of their companies explain any overcharges. In many cases, the missions were unable or unwilling to defend the contracts, and they were never approved. In cases where the missions did attempt to justify the overpricing, the United Nations forwarded them to the Security Council's Sanctions Committee with red flags about the cost.

Nevertheless, the State Department never exercised the power it had as a Sanctions Committee member to block any of the overpriced contracts flagged by the United Nations, nor did it otherwise try to halt Hussein's kickback scheme. Other members of the Security Council, including France, Russia and China, also failed to act.

We have learned that the State Department approved dozens of ridiculously overpriced contracts, including three multimillion-dollar deals submitted by Syria that were inflated by a whopping 44 percent. In February 2002, the State Department even approved the sale of a fleet of 300 Mercedes-Benz

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luxury cars for use by the Iraqi government.

I fully understand that our highest priority as a Sanctions Committee member was to make sure that Iraq could not get its hands on illicit and dual-use items, and the United States blocked thousands of contracts based on these concerns. But another important priority should have been to prevent overpriced contracts that invited kickbacks.

The United Nations clearly has to answer to the allegation that a U.N. official accepted bribes from Hussein, and the panel of inquiry headed by former Federal Reserve Chairman Paul A. Volcker will thoroughly investigate this charge. I would expect that such an inquiry would look at whether the United Nations had put in place sufficient mechanisms to deter corrupt behavior by its employees. If the panel also discovers evidence of shoddy management or other problems in the program, the United Nations must make appropriate reforms. In Congress, as we move forward with a responsible inquiry, we should also focus attention on our own government and other Security Council members, and find out why they didn't use the authority they had to block Hussein's padded contracts.

U.N. bashers would love to hold the United Nations culpable for Hussein's abuse of the oil-for-food program, because it would make an effective case for excluding the United Nations from Iraq's transition. But fairness and U.S. national interest require us to avoid being distracted by reckless distortions and to focus on facts.

Rep. Lantos, of California, is the ranking Democrat on the House International Relations Committee.

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