

Strike on Syria reactor a joint spy victory - CIA

Contributed by Randall Mikkelsen
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WASHINGTON (Reuters) - The destruction of a suspected Syrian nuclear reactor last year was the result of an intelligence collaboration that included a "foreign partner" who first identified the facility's purpose, CIA Director Gen. Michael Hayden said on Tuesday.

The lobby of the CIA Headquarters Building in McLean, Virginia in this August 14, 2008 file photo. (REUTERS/Larry Downing)

The reactor at the desert outpost of Al-Kibar was flattened in an air strike on Sept. 6, 2007 that senior U.S. intelligence officials have said was carried out by Israel on its own initiative.

"Our foreign partnerships ... were critical to the final outcome," Hayden said in a speech for delivery to the World Affairs Council of Los Angeles.

A U.S. intelligence official declined to specify the partner Hayden referred to or to say whether it was Israel. He said there have been no signs that Syria was trying to replace the destroyed reactor.

Israel has never given an account of the strike or formally confirmed that it took place and some Israeli officials have quietly voiced dismay at U.S. disclosures about the strike.

"We were able last year to spoil a big secret, a project that could have provided Syria with plutonium for nuclear weapons," Hayden said.

Syrian President Bashar al-Assad has denied U.S. allegations that his government pursued nuclear weapons with the help of North Korea.

Hayden said a report from the unnamed foreign partner first identified the facility as a reactor similar to one in North Korea, although U.S. intelligence had identified it as suspicious.

"When pipes for a massive cooling system were laid out to the Euphrates River in the spring of 2007, there would have been little doubt this was a nuclear reactor," Hayden said.

"We would have known it was North Korean, too, given the quantity and variety of intelligence reports on nuclear ties between Pyongyang and Damascus."

IRAN SUSPICION

Hayden said Iran remained a proliferation concern despite a formal conclusion last year by U.S. intelligence agencies that Tehran had suspended efforts to develop a nuclear warhead and weapons.

"Iran's behavior, coming as it does after years of nuclear activity they concealed and continue to deny, invites nothing but suspicion," he said.

The United Nations' International Atomic Energy Agency on Monday said Iran had blocked an inquiry into whether it had researched ways to make a nuclear bomb.

Hayden acknowledged U.S. arguments were open to question after Washington wrongly accused Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein of maintaining an active weapons program, the main reason cited by the Bush administration for invading Iraq in March 2003.

"One could argue that Iraq under Saddam was just as confrontational and ultimately lacked the weapons we thought were there," he said.

"Iran's leaders saw what happened to Saddam and still they reject every opportunity to come clean with the world."

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