

**Italy blames France for Niger uranium claim**  
By Bruce Johnston in Brussels and Kim Willsher in Paris  
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A row has broken out between France and Italy over whose intelligence service is to blame for the Niger uranium controversy, which led to Britain and America claiming wrongly that Saddam Hussein was trying to buy material for nuclear bombs.

Italian diplomats say that France was behind forged documents which at first appeared to prove that Iraq was seeking "yellow-cake" uranium in Niger - evidence used by Britain and America to promote the case for last year's Gulf war.

They say that France's intelligence services used an Italian-born middle-man to circulate a mixture of genuine and bogus documents to "trap" the two leading proponents of war with Saddam into making unsupportable claims.

They have passed to The Sunday Telegraph a photograph which they claim shows the Italian go-between, sometimes known as "Giacomo" - who cannot be identified for legal reasons - meeting a senior French intelligence officer based in Brussels. "The French hoped that the bulk of the documents would be exposed as false, since many of them obviously were," an Italian official said.

"Their aim was to make the allies look ridiculous in order to undermine their case for war."

According to an account given to The Sunday Telegraph, France was driven by "a cold desire to protect their privileged, dominant trading relationship with Saddam, which in the case of war would have been at risk".

The allegation, which has infuriated French officials, follows reports last month that "Giacomo" claimed to have been unwittingly used by Sismi, Italy's foreign intelligence service, to circulate the false documents.

The papers found their way to the CIA and to MI6, and in September 2002 Tony Blair accused Saddam of seeking "significant quantities" of uranium from an undisclosed African country - in fact, Niger. President George W Bush made a similar claim in his State of the Union address to Congress four months later, using information passed to him by MI6.

The International Atomic Energy Agency expressed doubts over the documents' authenticity, however, and in March 2003 declared them false.

The suggestion that Italy, driven by its government's support for America, had forged the documents to help to justify the war in Iraq, has caused a furore and has now led to the revelation of new information about "Giacomo".

The Sunday Telegraph has been told that the man has a criminal record for extortion and fraud, but draws a monthly salary of €4,000 (£2,715) from the DGSE - the French equivalent of MI6 - for which he is said to have worked for the past five years.

He had an expense account and received bonuses in return for carrying out orders allegedly given him by the head of the French services' operations in Belgium.

"Giacomo" could not be reached for comment on the claims last week at either his home in Formello, a suburb on the northern edge of Rome, or at his second home in Luxembourg.

He is said to be wanted for questioning over the Niger affair by Italian investigating magistrates, and is believed to be in the United States.

He is said to have received an 18-month prison sentence in 1985 for threatening violence against a bank manager in an extortion attempt. More recently he was apparently reported by Carabinieri for using stationery forged to appear to be from the Italian prime minister's office. He is said to have previously worked for Italian military intelligence, but was "kicked out" for running up debts with illegal loan sharks.

"Giacomo" was allegedly first engaged by the French secret service to investigate genuine fears of illicit trafficking in uranium from Niger. He collected a dossier of documents - some real, some forged by a diplomat - by offering large sums of money to Niger officials.

American intelligence officials were further misled over Saddam's supposed attempt to buy uranium when France -

which effectively controls mining in Niger - told Washington that it had reason to believe that Iraq was trying to do so. "Only later did Paris inform Washington that its belief had been based on the same documents that had tricked the Americans and the British," an Italian diplomat said.

"This was la grande trappola [the big trap]. The Americans were now convinced by the French that Saddam really was trying to buy uranium. They thought the French must be right, since not even a gram of uranium in Niger could be shifted without their knowledge."

British officials still say that the claim about Iraqi uranium purchases rested on a second source, not just the now-discredited documents. Intelligence officials from some other Western countries now believe, however, that the second source was also France - part of a "sinister trap" for Mr Blair.

French intelligence was asked by The Sunday Telegraph for a public comment on the allegations against it, but has yet to give one.

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