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Chalabi spies in Iraq still on US payroll

By Douglas Jehl in Washington
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The Pentagon is paying \$US340,000 (\$460,000) a month to the political organisation led by Ahmad Chalabi - a member of the interim Iraqi government who has close ties to the US - for "intelligence collection" about Iraq.

The classified program, run by the Defence Intelligence Agency since mid-2002, continues a longstanding partnership between the Pentagon and the Iraqi National Congress (INC), as the group jockeys for power in a future government. Mr Chalabi had pushed for years as an exile in the US for it to rid Iraq of Saddam Hussein.

Internal US Government reviews have found that much of the information generated by the program before the US invasion last year was useless, misleading or even fabricated.

But the Pentagon has leapt to the group's defence. "We're still getting good information from the INC," a US official said. "There are a lot of insurgents that are doing bad things and they have a lot of contacts and [are] making better ones every day." The group had provided information that had helped prevent recent attacks by insurgents, the official said.

Under the unusual arrangement, the CIA, which is more wary of Mr Chalabi than is the Pentagon, must get permission from the Pentagon before interviewing INC informants.

At least one of the defectors that Mr Chalabi's organisation introduced to the CIA before the war was labelled as a fabricator. Others were seen as having been coached by the INC to provide intelligence critical of Saddam's rule. Internal reviews by the Pentagon agency and the National Intelligence Council this year concluded that little of the information from the group had any value.

When asked about the payments during a television interview last weekend, Mr Chalabi said: "It's a very small program in terms of cost."

In Iraq two US citizens have become the first American civilians working for the Coalition Provisional Authority to be killed. They were shot with their Iraqi interpreter south of Baghdad, a coalition official said on Wednesday.

A top US military commander in the country has expressed frustration at repeated delays in procuring equipment for security forces, saying it is hampering efforts to restore security.

Major-General Charles Swannack said security would improve greatly if Iraqi police, border guards and the Iraqi Civil Defence Corps were equipped with body armour, radios and vehicles they have been seeking for months.

The New York Times, Reuters

This story was found at: <http://www.smh.com.au/articles/2004/03/11/1078594500238.html>