

Dear Mr Pritchard

Your Readers' Editor's reply of 17<sup>th</sup> June in the Observer fails to address the points The Campaign Against Sanctions and Military Intervention in Iran (CASMI) had raised in its complaint to the Observer of 13<sup>th</sup> June, neither does it abate our serious concern about the propaganda purpose of the story in the Observer. Whilst we appreciate your effort to have gone into the trouble of speaking to Mike Townsend about the origin of his story, since you quote from the letter by the Campaign Against Sanctions and Military Intervention in Iran, it would have been fair and proper to have published our letter in its entirety. That way, considering the grave importance of the issue at stake, you would have given your readers the opportunity to learn first hand of our concerns rather than guessing from your reply, and out of context. I therefore hope, to make good, and in the spirit of good journalistic practice, you will feel able to publish both CASMI's letters, the original letter of 13<sup>th</sup> June and this reply to your commentary of 17<sup>th</sup> June.

You refer to CASMI's concern about the incriminating headline and first paragraph being 'totally unsupported in the body of the article', and our belief that the story was an example of irresponsible journalism similar to those that "paved the way to the bloodbath in Iraq". You consider these to be serious charges and feel that Observer has been "unfairly vilified". It has therefore become necessary to further clarify some points:

**1.** The Headline is misleading and prejudicial, by any stretch of imagination. "*MI6 Probes UK link to Nuclear Trade with Iran*" conveys an immediate and definite impression that Iran is involved in illegal nuclear trade and a UK link has been found and is being probed.

**2.** Para 2 of the article states that a group of Britons has been "*tracked as they obtained weapons grade uranium from black market in Russia*". This is a statement of fact. It then immediately follows on that "*Investigators believe it was intended for export to Sudan and on to Iran*". There is not a shred of evidence or any attempt to question such a belief. There is no doubt that repeated juxtaposition of fact and supposition, creates a confusion of boundaries between the two and for the unsuspecting reader the boundary between the two is blurred, so that all is read as fact. This is repeated throughout the story.

**3.** The reference to the AlQaeda link, is another case of distorting juxtaposition of 'information'. The paragraph which follows on immediately from the 20 months investigation and the Iranian link referred to above, states "*A number of Britons, who are understood to have links with Islamic terrorists abroad, remain under surveillance*" and that the investigators believe to have uncovered "*the first proof that Al-Qaeda supporters have been actively engaged in developing an atomic capability*". Again what is created is a confusion of boundaries between two separate sets of 'information', which could most likely form the impression that Iran is involved in a larger plot of "Islamic terrorists" with Al-Qaeda, of illegally obtaining and actively developing an atomic capability.

**4.** Mr Townsend makes a clear reference to Iran's "nuclear weapons programme". He says: "*Anti-terrorist officers and MI6 are now investigating a wider British-based plot*

*allegedly to supply Iran with material for use in a nuclear weapons programme*". And *"Investigators are understood to have evidence that Iran was to receive the uranium to help develop a nuclear weapons capability"*. Or in his clarification to yourself, that *"European intelligence assessments have established that Russian uranium is finding its way to Iran via Sudan"*. However, yourself and Mr Townsend must be very well aware that the IAEA, despite 2700 person hours of intensive, unimpeded and ongoing inspection, has failed to produce a shred of evidence of a nuclear weapons programme. Had Mr Townsend's "investigators" ANY evidence of this or any connection regarding illegal import of nuclear material, it would have been presented to the IAEA and subject of their investigations. Neither did Mr Townsend make any attempt to question these totally unsubstantiated allegations – on which the story is based - or any attempt to balance his story by the inclusion of any reference to the inspections and findings of the IAEA.

5. You say Mr Townsend stresses that he *"spent 12 months carefully monitoring the progress of the investigation with many sources"*, which makes it all the more worrying, because Mr Townsend has been very negatively selective in the choice and presentation of his information. He says: *"European intelligence assessments have established that Russian uranium is finding its way to Iran via Sudan"*. If there is an "established" fact, then there should be known culprits and known evidence, and this too would be under jurisdiction of the IAEA to investigate. There is no evidence of that. He then goes on to say, that *"There is no firm evidence at this stage that Tehran and Khartoum governments were involved in this alleged plot, and I was careful to distance them from it"*. On the contrary, he did not distance them from it: He states in his report that *"Investigators are understood to have evidence that Iran was to receive the uranium to help develop a nuclear weapons capability"* and although adding that *"the level of involvement, if any, of the governments in Khartoum and Tehran in the alleged nuclear plot is unclear"*, he qualifies this by presenting his *"circumstantial"* evidence which, according to him, is the close tie between Tehran and Khartoum and their mutual defence co-operation pact!!

6. Most importantly, I have good reason to believe that Mr Townsend, in the process of his investigation, chose to neglect some information made available to him, and appears to have been fishing for sensation, just a couple of days before the story was published, with an entirely different but related story that came to nothing. Facts that could have brought his story into question and that he was aware of, were not mentioned in the article. Mr Townsend before publishing his story contacted a Senior Security Analyst, with particular speciality in nuclear non-proliferation and disarmament (with a focus on Iran and the UK). Mr Townsend had questioned this source, not about highly enriched uranium, but about an old story of uranium yellow cake being illicitly supplied to Iran. Our anonymous source had explained to Mr Townsend in detail the process of mining uranium to the stage of conversion to highly enriched uranium and why this story did not fit the facts because the drawn out nature of the operation and the high quantities involved would make it not possible to carry this out clandestinely. Our source had explained that even if the intention were to produce highly enriched uranium, it would make sense to simply use the natural uranium in Iran! However, even then, to carry out the whole operation without being detected was quite a feat not least because of the quantities of materials involved in the early stages. Our source maintains that the story in the Observer bore little resemblance to the conversation he had with Mr Townsend because had Mr Townsend referred to highly enriched uranium or the source in Russia,

our source believes he would have explained to him the improbability of such an operation and the propaganda potential of such a story similar to those propagated before the invasion of Iraq.

7. We believe that in the light of the seriousness of these allegations, particularly in the current climate which bears an eerie resemblance to the period when the propaganda war raged to manufacture consent for the military invasion of Iraq, it is necessary for the Observer to show good will by setting the record straight. This, in our opinion, would be a public acknowledgement and publishing, in addition to our letters of June 13<sup>th</sup> and this letter, a fact-sheet regarding Iran's nuclear programme using the IAEA as the source, or giving CASMII the opportunity to put its position regarding the Iranian nuclear issue across in the form of a comment or an article. This is also important from the point of view of re-building trust, because we found this story particularly alarming and disappointing coming from the Observer which has a deserved reputation for high quality journalism and has produced commendable work in many areas including wars and conflicts, which have generally been well researched and balanced.

Yours sincerely

Campaign Against Sanctions and Military Intervention in Iran, UK