

Britain warned US to expect September 11 al-Qaeda hijackings

By **Torcuil Crichton**, Westminster Editor

Britain gave President Bush a categorical warning to expect multiple airline hijackings by the al-Qaeda network a month before the September 11 attacks which killed nearly 3000 people and triggered the international war against terrorism.

The confirmation of repeated British intelligence warnings about al-Qaeda hijackings -- first established by the Sunday Herald in 1999 -- comes amid claims that the US intelligence community has now received further information of an imminent second wave of terrorist attacks on America.

According to US government officials, the British warning of al-Qaeda plans to hijack US airliners was contained in a crucial briefing sent to Bush on August 6, a month before the attacks on the World Trade Centre and the Pentagon.

Bush is under severe pressure over accusations that his administration failed to act on intelligence reports before September 11 that highlighted the possibility of hijacked planes being used to attack buildings in the US.

The revelation that British sources passed on information about possible hijackings now raises the question of how much the UK security services knew about al-Qaeda plans and what action they took to prevent them. According to US officials the warning that bin Laden's followers might hijack planes was based on 1998 intelligence data drawn from a single British source.

The information from the British source -- most likely to be the government intelligence service MI6 -- did not specify airliners would be used as missiles against buildings, but it did form part of a pattern of alerts emerging from the UK in the months leading up to September 11.

According to the US government, the British source said that al-Qaeda had an interest in hijacking airplanes in order to obtain hostages who could be used as bargaining chips so the terrorist organisation could demand the freedom of Sheik Omar Abdel Rahman, a Muslim cleric convicted in 1995 for his role in the failed plot to blow up the World Trade Centre.

The relevance of the warning and several other intelligence briefings, including FBI suspicions that terrorist suspects were undertaking flight training in the US, can only be seen with the benefit of hindsight, Bush officials insist.

The British warning is one of a string of alerts that the UK flagged over bin Laden and the al-Qaeda network. In August 1999, British and American airlines went on red alert after intelligence warnings that bin Laden supporters were planning a Lockerbie-style bomb attack in the West.

At the time, US forces were reported to be preparing to snatch bin Laden from Taliban-controlled Afghanistan and put him on trial for his involvement in two US embassy explosions in Africa which killed 250 people.

After the September 11 attacks, it emerged the UK was the nerve centre for al-Qaeda operations in the west. Records of bin Laden's satellite phone calls indicate he and his most senior lieutenants made over 260 calls from their base in Afghanistan to 27 numbers in Britain. They included suspected terrorist agents, sympathisers and companies. Some were prearranged calls to public pay phones.

The Foreign Office spokesman said last night that it would not comment on operational intelligence matters.

Yesterday US intelligence officials claimed their security agencies have intercepted a number of vague yet troubling communications among al-Qaeda operatives over the past few months indicating it is planning another series of attacks on America.

Like last summer, when the Bush administration received vague warnings of a terrorist attack that left the government guessing that al-Qaeda would strike outside the US, the new interceptions are so general they have left Bush and his counter-terrorism team in the dark about the time, place or method of possible second-wave attack.

As a result, the US is limited to taking broad defensive measures. 'It's again not specific □ not specific as to time, not specific as to place,' one senior administration official told the New York Times yesterday.

The officials have compared the intercepted messages, which they described as cryptic and ambiguous, to the pattern of those picked up last spring and early summer, when al-Qaeda operatives were also overheard talking about a big operation.

A senior official said that the amount of intelligence relating to another possible attack, in Europe, the Arabian Peninsula or the US, had increased in the last month. Some of it comes from interviews with fighters captured in Afghanistan.

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