

Argentiniens Say They Heard Terror Alert Weeks Before 9/11

FORWARD STAFF

Leaders of Argentina's Jewish community received a warning about an impending major terrorist attack against the United States, Argentina or France just weeks before September 11, the Forward has learned.

The warning, delivered by a foreign intelligence source at the end of July, was relayed to the Argentine security authorities during a meeting several days later. At the meeting, it was agreed to keep the warning secret in order to avoid panic while reinforcing security at Jewish sites in the country.

"It was a concrete warning that an attack of major proportion would take place, and it came from a reliable intelligence source," said Marta Nercellas, a lawyer for the Delegación de Asociaciones Israelitas Argentinas, or DAIA, Argentina's main Jewish representative body. "And I understand the Americans were told about it."

Alfredo Neuburger, a spokesman for the DAIA, confirmed the warning and the ensuing meeting. Both he and Nercellas refused to divulge the origin of the information, only saying it was a foreign and solid one.

A U.S. official at the embassy in Buenos Aires said he had no indication that such information had been relayed to U.S. authorities. Spokesmen for the FBI and the State Department declined to comment. So did the Argentine Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

The Jewish leaders' accounts of the warning come as members of Congress are openly criticizing the FBI for failing to streamline and relay information gathered by its local agents about the suspicious behavior of Middle Eastern students in American flight schools prior to the attacks.

More broadly, the Bush Administration is facing scrutiny for refusing to divulge a presidential intelligence briefing warning that the Al Qaeda network was planning to use hijacked planes in a terror attack and for opposing an independent investigation of its handling of the pre-September 11 warnings.

Since the bombings of the Israeli embassy in Argentina in 1992 and the AMIA Jewish communal center in Buenos Aires two years later, the Jewish community in Argentina has received recurring warnings of terrorist attacks.

Jose Hercman, the chairman of the DAIA, said warnings were issued "once or twice a month" and that he did not specifically remember this one. "It's very possible we got one at the time," he added.

His spokesman Neuburger, however, said he precisely remembered the warning and that it was discussed with the local and federal police and "presumably relayed to our intelligence service and the foreign countries concerned by it."

Nercellas said the Argentine authorities informed Jewish community leaders that the American and French authorities had indeed been informed, adding that an American was present at the meeting, although she said she could not say if he was an official.

After the September 11 attacks, French authorities said they had thwarted an attempt to strike the American embassy in Paris last fall.

This is not the first time Argentina has been involved in reports of terrorist warnings. Late last year, an Argentine diplomat disclosed that a few weeks before the October 12, 2000, attack on the *U.S.S. Cole*, the Argentine embassy in Saudi Arabia had received three threatening messages in Arabic on its answering machine. In them, a man claiming to speak for Al Qaeda took responsibility for "a bombing" in Argentina and warned that America would have a "surprise" a few days later, on September 26.

In a testimony given to the judge investigating the AMIA bombing, a copy of which was obtained by the Forward, the Argentine diplomat, Juan Jose Echegoyen, said he immediately sent high-priority cables to his Foreign Ministry. The ministry then told him that an official from the U.S. embassy in Riyadh would contact him. The next day, Echegoyen said, he accompanied U.S. officials to the Argentine embassy, where they were able to retrieve the messages from the answering machine. They explained to him that those warnings had to be taken seriously, he added.

Several days later, the Argentine ambassador then told him not to worry about the issue anymore, especially since no attack had taken place on September 26, as the caller had announced. However, the diplomat said that when a boat laden with explosives rammed into the *U.S.S. Cole* in Yemen on October 12, killing 17 American soldiers, he thought the call was indeed related to the attack.

He added that the Argentine embassy was never given the transcripts of the phone messages or the results of the investigation conducted by U.S. officials in coordination with the Saudi authorities.

Sources close to the AMIA investigation told the Forward that they had requested the information from Washington, but had received no response until now. However, the investigators are skeptical of an Al Qaeda link to the AMIA bombing, having evidence that points toward Hezbollah and Iran.

U.S. law enforcement authorities declined to comment.

— Marc Perelman

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