

Britain's airline terror plot: Questions that need to be answered

By the Editorial Board
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The claim that American and British security forces have thwarted a terrorist plot to blow up commercial flights between Britain and the United States should not be accepted uncritically. It is impossible to determine at this point whether or not such an attack was in the offing, although the mass media have, as usual, reported the assertions of the British and American governments as indisputable fact, without bothering to ask for any specific information that would substantiate the official story.

The British police statement that the alleged plotters aimed to “create mass murder on an unimaginable scale” by blowing up mid-flight an unspecified number of aircraft is chilling. The far-reaching security measures that have been implemented—including the shutdown of London's Heathrow Airport and an indefinite ban on carry-on luggage—add to the climate of fear and apprehension.

At a time such as this—in the midst of spectacular claims from London and Washington, a media barrage supporting them, and a massive disruption of commercial flights resulting from extreme security measures—it is all the more imperative that people not suspend their capacity for critical thought and political judgement.

Raids in the early hours of Thursday morning on homes and business premises in London and the West Midlands resulted in 21 arrests. Spokesmen for the US and British governments asserted that those arrested were involved in the most significant terrorist plot since 9/11.

Later reports said that 24 people had been arrested in Britain and more had been detained in Pakistan. Among those arrested were a Muslim charity worker and a Heathrow Airport employee with an all-area access pass, according to Britain's Channel 4 News. Five suspects in the plot are still at large, according to ABC News, which cited US sources.

BBC News reported Thursday evening that the arrests were the result of a long-standing investigation coordinated between the US, British and Pakistani governments. British Home Secretary John Reid in a press conference earlier on Thursday said Prime Minister Tony Blair had briefed President George Bush on the impending arrests and security measures over the weekend.

Subsequent reports claimed the plotters had planned to

target simultaneously up to ten aircraft from three US carriers by smuggling onboard liquid chemical explosives disguised as beverages or electronic devices.

US intelligence officials said the plotters hoped to stage a “dry run” today (Friday) and the actual attack would have followed days later. A senior congressional source claimed the plotters planned to mix a sports drink with a peroxide-based paste to make an “explosive cocktail” that could be triggered by an MP3 player or cell phone.

President George Bush made a brief statement mid-day Thursday that was calculated to heighten public anxieties and exploit the alleged terror plot to justify the panoply of reactionary policies his administration has pursued since 9/11 in the name of the “war on terror.”

Speaking on an airport runway in Green Bay, Wisconsin, he said that the thwarted plot was a “stark reminder that this nation is at war with Islamic fascists who will use any means to destroy those of us who love freedom.” He suggested that the plot vindicated the measures—massive domestic spying, military tribunals, detentions without trial—taken by his administration to “protect the American people,” and went on to warn that “it is a mistake to believe there is no threat to the United States of America.”

The *World Socialist Web Site* has no information that allows us to make a definitive judgement on the existence or non-existence of a terrorist plot on the scale claimed. However, it is the responsibility of the US and British governments to produce the facts that would substantiate their allegations and justify the extreme security measures they have taken, and to present these facts to the public in a clear and concise manner.

They have produced no such factual account or substantiation.

Neither the White House nor Downing Street has any right to expect people to accept their claims at face value, or place confidence in any of their statements. The war against Iraq was legitimised on the basis of false claims of Iraqi weapons of mass destruction and ties between Saddam Hussein and Al Qaeda. These lies have destroyed forever the credibility of Bush and Blair.

If it is true that such a heinous crime was being planned, the responsibility for this ultimately rests with the policies pursued by Washington and London. Ever since 9/11, both Bush and Blair have employed the mantra of the “war on terror” as a cover for their predatory war aims in the Middle East, immensely intensifying anti-American and anti-British

sentiment within the Muslim world. At the same time, the “war on terror” has been used domestically as the pretext for an unprecedented assault on democratic rights.

Faced with a worsening debacle in Afghanistan and Iraq, and massive international opposition to their support for Israel’s devastation of Lebanon, both governments have an interest in perpetuating an atmosphere of hysteria. Such a climate serves to intimidate their opponents and justify ever more draconian measures at home and abroad.

In point of fact, the official accounts in Britain of the alleged terror plot lack any specific or verifiable facts and are remarkably short on detail. The statements by American officials are no better when it comes to serious substantiation. They are, however, more detailed in their claims.

US Homeland Security Secretary Michael Chertoff told a televised news conference that the plot was “a very sophisticated plan and operation” and was close to fruition. “It was not a circle with a handful of people sitting around and dreaming,” he said. “They had accumulated the capability necessary and they were well on their way.”

The plot appeared to have been aimed at US carriers flying out of Heathrow, he continued. It was “international in scope” and suggestive of Al Qaeda.

He did not give a specific date for the timing of the plan, but said it may have been before the anniversary of the 9/11 attacks. “I can’t tell you they had a particular date in mind,” he said. “Nor can I tell you that they would have waited that long. This was quite close to the execution date.”

Chertoff offered no explanation of how security services knew that a terror attack was imminent when they didn’t know the target date for its execution.

This is by no means the only question mark hanging over official accounts.

Britain’s Home Secretary Reid gave the impression in his press conference that the evidence prompting the arrests came from the UK, and CNN reported that information gathered after recent arrests in Pakistan convinced British investigators they had to act urgently to stop the plot. However, Britain’s Channel 4 reported that UK authorities had acted based on intelligence provided by the CIA.

Moreover, if Blair was in discussions with Bush over the weekend about an “imminent” terrorist attack, why did he still leave for his holiday in Barbados on Tuesday? And given that the plot is said to have targeted planes, why did the security services allow him to do so?

And if the threat posed by the plot was considered dangerous enough to warrant raising the terror alert in the UK from “severe” to “critical” and to code red in the US, why were no arrests made for five days? And why was the terror alert only raised *after* the arrests were made and not before?

No such questions have been asked by the media. And yet recent months have seen a number of alleged terrorist plots—in the US, Canada and Australia—that were supposedly thwarted by the security services. In each case, mass arrests were made of people who, according to the indictments, had merely discussed terrorist acts. No concrete plans were discovered, no weapons or explosives seized. And in most of these cases, the supposed plots were initiated and encouraged by government informers who acted as agent provocateurs and entrapped the alleged conspirators.

In the case of July’s so-called “tunnel bomb” plot in New York, the purported conspirators were foreign nationals who had never set foot in the US.

As for the political utility of the current terror scare, it should be noted that only hours before Thursday’s raids, British Home Secretary Reid gave a major speech in London in which he accused opponents of the government’s anti-democratic legislation of undermining the “war on terror.”

In the face of what he called “probably the most sustained period of severe threat since the end of the second world war,” Reid decried those who “don’t get it,” blaming them for the fact that “we remain unable to adapt our institutions and legal orthodoxy as fast as we need to.”

Making it clear that the required “adaptation” meant the gutting of traditional democratic rights, he added: “Sometimes we may have to modify some of our own freedoms in the short term in order to prevent their misuse and abuse by those who oppose our fundamental values and would destroy all of our freedoms in the modern world.”

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