

Questions mount in Kenya, Tanzania bombings

US government, Israeli intelligence had advance warning

Martin McLaughlin
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The search for survivors of the bombing of the US embassy in Nairobi, Kenya ended officially at 10 a.m. local time Wednesday, with the death toll set at 247, and 5,436 injured. Another 10 people died and 70 were injured in the simultaneous bombing of the US embassy in Dar es-Salaam, in neighboring Tanzania, bringing the combined death toll to 257.

The gruesome task of fully excavating the blast site and recovering the remaining bodies continues. At least three Kenyan employees of the embassy are still missing, along with an unknown but likely much larger number of victims in the rubble of the Ufundi House, next door to the embassy.

Several hundred FBI and American police bomb site investigators have flooded Nairobi, cordoning off the area around the embassy and beginning efforts to determine the type of explosive used in the huge blast, as well as identifying the vehicle, believed to be a pickup truck, which delivered it. An official report on the techniques used in the explosion is not expected for many months.

What information has been made public in the international press, however, raises disturbing questions about the circumstances leading up to the bombing and the role of US and Israeli intelligence agencies.

Several US and Israeli sources, including ABC News and the Tel Aviv newspaper *Ha'aretz*, reported Wednesday that a US informant in Kenya had warned the American government two weeks before the blast that the Nairobi embassy had been targeted for a bomb attack.

The informant was a contact of Israel's Mossad intelligence service, but when American officials checked with Mossad about the reliability of the source,

they were advised to treat the report with skepticism. No special security measures were taken at the embassy.

The office of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu refused to comment on the *Ha'aretz* article. But the Israeli government's dismissal of this advance warning may account for its extraordinary effort to supply bomb experts and rescue teams in the wake of the bombing, for reasons which have not otherwise been explained.

A second warning was provided four days before the explosion, according the *Nation*, the English-language daily newspaper published in Nairobi. A security guard working near the Nairobi embassy saw a man videotaping the building, protected by two bodyguards. When the cameraman saw he had been observed, he and his escorts jumped into a car and sped away. The security guard reported the incident to guards at the embassy, who seemed uninterested. Even though, according to ABC News, all American facilities in the Middle East and South Asia had been put on security alert against a threatened terrorist attack, no special security measures were ordered in East Africa even after the second report.

Most accounts of the bombing in the American press have named a Saudi exile, Osama bin Laden, as the most likely suspect. Bin Laden, a construction multi-millionaire, is an Islamic fundamentalist opposed to the US military presence in Saudi Arabia during and since the 1991 Persian Gulf war. He fled Saudi Arabia in 1994 and reportedly now lives in Afghanistan.

But according to several of the reports, bin Laden was associated with the CIA-backed *mujahedin* guerrillas during their war against the Soviet military occupation

of Afghanistan in the 1980s. Among these were the CIA-trained terrorists who later were convicted in the bombing of the World Trade Center in New York City.

The attitude of American officials to the investigations by Kenyan and Tanzanian police is also curious. After Tanzanian officials arrested several dozen people in Dar es-Salaam, the State Department belittled the action as little more than a roundup of 'the usual suspects.' The announcement by Kenyan President Daniel arap Moi that an unspecified number of suspects had been arrested in Nairobi was also dismissed as unlikely to represent an advance in the investigation.

The New York Times reported claims of some eyewitnesses in Nairobi that the truck used in the embassy bombing had American diplomatic license plates. Another eyewitness claimed that the man who leaped from the truck and threw a hand grenade just before the bomb blast was wearing a blue uniform identical to that worn by embassy guards.

Even more striking is a report carried in the *Washington Post* Wednesday, based on a leak from the CIA in which the agency claimed to have foiled two recent attempts to bomb American embassies in the Middle East. The *Post* article quotes Robert Oakley, the former State Department coordinator for counterterrorism, on the US efforts to infiltrate terrorist groups targeting American facilities.

According to the *Post*: 'He recalled an episode in the mid-1980s when U.S. intelligence recruited a terrorist who had been assigned to bomb an American embassy in Europe. The putative bomber, Oakley said, was allowed to detonate a bomb inside the embassy compound in such a way that little damage was done, far removed from US personnel, so that his relationship with US intelligence was not exposed.'

Taken together, these reports raise the possibility that the horrific loss of life in Nairobi and Dar es-Salaam may be linked, directly or indirectly, to covert operations by US intelligence agencies, in which individuals with past CIA connections but present grievances against the US government, such as the former Afghan *mujahedin*, were involved.

Such questions are not even considered in the American media discussion of the East African bombings, in which major newspapers and television networks are vying to supply one or another Middle

East nation as a potential target for US military retaliation.

The *New York Times* suggested Libya as a target in its Wednesday news pages, while an editorial vilified Iraq. The *Washington Post* added Syria and Islamic fundamentalist groups based in Yemen and Egypt to the list.

The *Wall Street Journal* published a column the same day denouncing the Clinton administration for ignoring evidence that Iran was behind blasts, and declaring the attack on the embassies 'an act of war.' The *Journal* cited US bombing raids on Libya in 1986, ordered by Ronald Reagan, as an example for Clinton.

Another column in the *Journal*, by its Washington correspondent, revealed that the Pentagon changed the composition of US forces in the Persian Gulf region after last February's confrontation with Saddam Hussein, so that a protracted buildup would not be required before launching air strikes against targets in Iraq. Such attacks could be launched against Iraq--or any other target in region--literally overnight.

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