

New Zealand police criticise US embassy over release of hoax terror letter

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New Zealand police last week asked staff at the US embassy in Wellington to explain how a letter making a terror threat against the America's Cup yacht race in Auckland was obtained by the CNN television network despite requirements that it be kept confidential. CNN broadcast details of the letter soon after authorities revealed its existence on February 25. The release of the transcript by CNN forced the police to publicly confirm the letter's contents.

Identical letters containing white powder were sent to the US Ambassador, the Australian and British High Commissioners and the *New Zealand Herald* newspaper. They were intercepted at the Auckland central mail exchange on February 21 before reaching their destinations. The powder in the letter to the British High Commissioner tested positive as cyanide. Police complained that the release of the letter compromised their investigation because few besides the author would have known the details.

A US embassy spokeswoman told the *Herald* that the letter had been obtained by the American media "inadvertently" and the mission "regretted" the incident. "It was a mistake. We have conferred with Washington to help ensure that this sort of thing doesn't happen again," she said. Police counter-terrorism chief, Assistant Commissioner Jon White, said CNN had told his officers the letter's text was taken from a website where it had been posted by the US State Department's Overseas Security Advisory Council. The council is set up to share security-related information between the US government and American firms working abroad. He confirmed the information had been sourced from the Wellington embassy.

The letters were purportedly from a group called "September 11", claiming it had stockpiled 25kg of cyanide. Challenging the "great satan America", the

group said it would "resist its imperialist ambitions in the Islamic world". It warned that the group would "fight jihad" by attacking American interests with whatever weapons it had. Australia and Britain were implicated for their foreign policies. The sender also claimed responsibility for a similar letter posted to the US embassy prior to last year's New Zealand Golf Open at which US golfer Tiger Woods was playing. The writer claimed to have succeeded in closing the Israeli embassy as a result of the earlier threats.

The police maintained they had wanted to keep the letters out of the public domain for fear they might spark false admissions, or "copycat" letters. It appears, however, that the authorities quickly concluded that the letters were a hoax. But it suited their purposes to keep them under wraps while public warnings over unspecified terrorist threats were relayed through the media. Four days after their discovery the existence of the letters was publicly revealed, along with the presence of cyanide—but not their actual contents. Police and health officials released statements advising the public to be "vigilant" around public transport and when eating food prepared and packaged by others. They cautioned America's Cup spectators and participants to look out for anything "out of the ordinary", while armed members of the police Special Tactics Group were put on patrol at the Viaduct Harbour yacht base.

The deputy director of public health advised: "[M]ake sure that when you're eating food, say in a restaurant or public place, that it hasn't been contaminated, so in other words that the package isn't ripped, that it hasn't been sitting out for somebody to add something to it." Playing down the fact that, unlike anthrax, cyanide is readily available for industrial, farming and other purposes and is not dangerous unless ingested, the

media took to the issue with relish, saying it demonstrated that New Zealand was “not immune” from terrorist threats. One television current affairs program made the dire assertion that 25 kilograms of cyanide was sufficient to kill “a quarter of the country’s population”.

Once the letters’ actual contents became known, it was soon confirmed that they were almost certainly a hoax. Experts concluded that, far from originating from a terrorist cell, they were probably from someone pretending to be a foreigner to disguise his or her identity, or to create a provocation against the Muslim community. Dr Laurie Bauer, a linguist at Victoria University, said the letter contained many poor attempts at grammatical errors to fool readers, and mistakes that would not have been made by an Arabic speaker who had limited English skills. “It sounds to me as if it’s really an English speaker who’s writing this and hoping that by missing out the word ‘the’ occasionally we’ll all be fooled into thinking it’s someone who can’t write English,” he said.

Auckland University lecturer Tim Behrend told the *Herald* that the letters seemed “very transparent and like an incredibly bad effort... They don’t appear to have been written by a non-native speaker of English or someone who is accustomed to being around non-native English speakers. What I see here is someone who is mimicking a foreign voice.” Behrend said the content was also unconvincing. There was no reason to target the America’s Cup, with Swiss and New Zealand teams competing but no Americans. It was unlikely the writer had a real political agenda—it seemed to be simply “mischievous”.

A number of Muslim leaders who spoke to the *Herald*—all of whom wanted to remain anonymous—doubted the writer was part of a group fighting for the rights of Islamic people because of a number of fundamental errors. Chief among them was the signature, “Abd Allah September 11”. “Abd” in Arabic means servant and “Allah” God, but the way this had been written was incorrect. As a phrase the two words are meaningless, and it could not be a name because Muslims cannot take the name “Allah”.

Nevertheless, both the government and the media seized on the hoax to whip up an atmosphere of uncertainty and anxiety. Against this backdrop, Prime Minister Helen Clark announced last Friday that

unprecedented security precautions would be put in place for the forthcoming visit of Australian Prime Minister John Howard. Howard is due to arrive in New Zealand on March 8, fresh from discussions at the White House over preparations for the coming war with Iraq. According to local protest groups, he is likely to meet the most “intense” demonstrations ever mounted against a visiting Australian Prime Minister. Clark has warned of stringent security measures to prevent the disruption of official activities or the threat of Howard being personally “assaulted”.



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