

Britain: anti-terror raids condemned as victimisation

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Police have been given until August 17 to continue questioning nine men arrested in recent anti-terrorist raids. Those detained under anti-terror legislation can be held for questioning without charge for up to two weeks.

The nine were part of 13 men arrested in a series of high-profile raids in London, Herfordshire, Luton and Blackburn on August 3. Two were almost immediately freed without charge. Two more are no longer being questioned under the Terrorism Act but have been rearrested on suspicion of identity fraud and immigration violations.

Police have refused to reveal the identities of those detained, and have not given details of the allegations against them. That has not prevented the British media from indulging in highly speculative and lurid claims that a major terrorist network has been uncovered.

Newspapers report that the nine arrests are related to the capture of Mohammad Naeem Noor Khan, a 25-year-old computer expert arrested in Pakistan last month. On August 1, the Bush administration released Khan's name, claiming that files found on his computer showed Al Qaeda was planning a series of terror attacks on major US financial institutions.

Though the files recovered are several years old and contain no information of any future terror targets, the Bush administration has used Khan's arrest to justify raising the terror alert level from yellow to orange in several major US cities.

It has subsequently been revealed that Khan had been working as a covert agent for Pakistani intelligence in a sting operation against Al Qaeda suspects internationally—an operation that Pakistani officials complain has been undermined by the US administration's decision to name Khan publicly.

British police have denied any connection between the US administration's announcement and the UK raids. Those detained had been under surveillance for several months, the police claim, and their arrests are in response to new information.

Just what this new information consists of has not been

disclosed. According to newspaper reports, the nine men detained are linked to an alleged terrorist plot to blow up Heathrow airport—details of which were also said to have been discovered on Khan's computer.

But the Home Office has denied there is any such plot to target Heathrow airport, and a Heathrow spokesman said the airport had received no instructions from the authorities to step up security. He said Heathrow remained at the same heightened level of security it had maintained over recent months.

Newspaper reports have also claimed that one of those detained in the UK is Abu Musa al-Hindi (also known as Issa al-Britani), whom US sources have described as a "crucial figure in Al Qaeda's terror network."

According to these accounts, al-Hindi, a taxi driver, had been in regular contact with Khan. Using South African and Sudanese passports, he is alleged to have traveled to the US on several occasions in the last years, using his trips to compile information for targeting the Prudential Building in Newark, New Jersey, for attack. However, the Sudanese embassy in London said it knew nothing about al-Hindi and had never been contacted by British authorities about his alleged activities.

The various terror allegations become even murkier in the case of Babar Ahmad, a 30-year-old IT officer, who was detained on August 5 in a separate police raid.

Ahmad is being held on a US extradition warrant. Appearing before a London magistrate's court last week, a lawyer acting for the US authorities claimed that Babar had been "found in possession of strategic plans for a US navy battle group in the Gulf," including "an assessment of their vulnerability to terrorist attacks."

Ahmad is also accused of having e-mail links to one of the men suspected of planning the 2002 Moscow theatre siege, which ended in the deaths of some 120 people, and operating a series of pro-Jihad websites aimed at raising money for the Taliban and Al Qaeda.

The court heard that his web sites gave instructions for delivering money to Taliban leaders and to Islamic guerrillas

fighting Russian forces in Chechnya between 1998 and 2001, and told Pakistani nationals in Canada, the US and Britain how to travel to Afghanistan via Pakistan to fight for the Taliban.

The US extradition warrant states that any funds raised were to be used “for violence, damage to property or murder to advance a political, religious or ideological cause.”

Asked in court if he understood the charges, Ahmad said, “Not really, it’s all a bit confusing to me.” He has been remanded in custody, pending further extradition hearings.

His family and Muslim organisations in Britain have greeted Ahmad’s arrest with outrage and charges of political victimisation.

Ahmad was previously arrested in December, when detectives apparently discovered the 2001 battle-group documents, said to give details of the ships’ movements in the Strait of Hormuz at the entrance to the Gulf. But the case against him was so flimsy that he was released without charge six days later.

Ahmad then complained to the Police Complaints Authority that he had been assaulted during the arrest. His treatment led to the establishment of a campaign group, Stop Police Terror (STP), aimed at highlighting police harassment of Muslims under anti-terrorist legislation.

His rearrest came just two days before he was due to speak at an STP conference about the police violence he allegedly suffered during his previous detention.

An STP action alert states: “It is rather convenient that the British establishment are now seeking to eliminate the very individual who has exposed and widely publicised the extent of police brutality and the arbitrariness of their arrests.”

Describing Ahmad as “a law-abiding, upright British citizen,” the action alert accuses Anti-Terrorist officers of “brutally beat[ing] Mr. Ahmad, inflicting more than 50 potentially life-threatening injuries in December 2003.”

It also states that Ahmad had been held in solitary confinement during his detention and subjected to psychological abuse “only to release him as a free man without a single charge leveled against him.”

The alert continues: “Surely if there had been a shred of incriminating evidence it would have been found in the forensic search of his property, in the intricate scans of his computers or in the raid of his workplace. And if that were not enough, then exhaustively sending samples of his DNA and fingerprints around the globe should have been more than adequate in securing some charge, but unsurprisingly—yet again—they were able to find nothing. So from where arises the need to extradite this British citizen to a country famous for its human rights abuses?”

Ahmad’s place at the STP conference was taken by his father, retired civil servant Ashfaq Ahmad. In a strident

defence of his son, Ashfaq denounced the allegations against him as “wild and ridiculous lies. My son is completely and totally innocent. He is an average, law-abiding young man who has never been in trouble—he has never even had a parking ticket. My son is not a terrorist—he is a junior IT support officer.”

“I am no match for the resources of the United States, but I will do everything in my power to help my son,” he said before breaking down in tears. “I never thought that the day would come when I would regret my 40 years of life and service in this country,” he told reporters.

Ahmad’s sister told the *Muslim News*, “The police searched everything in December.... They did not find anything, so how can they say that he used his e-mails and websites for terrorist activities. It is all lies. Don’t they understand they are destroying other people’s lives just to please the USA?”

Muslim groups have also condemned Ahmad’s arrest. Inayat Bunglawala, from the Muslim Council of Britain, said, “We are utterly shocked and appalled. He was arrested last December by our police, badly assaulted and then released without charge. An investigation is ongoing. To see him arrested again on an extradition warrant beggars belief. The British authorities seem content to involve itself in the victimisation of this man and his family.”

Some 600 people have been arrested under anti-terror legislation in the UK since 9/11, but only 14 have been convicted of offences related to terrorism. Most of the others have been charged with immigration offences or other minor misdemeanors.

Ahmad’s solicitor, Muddassar Arani, said that the extradition warrant had been served against his client because there was not enough evidence to charge him in Britain.

“It appears when anybody is arrested in this country in relation to terrorist offences and there is not sufficient evidence to prosecute, they are sent to America,” he said.



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