

Britain: trial finds no evidence of “ricin plot”

Another Iraq war lie exposed

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On April 12, the case collapsed against eight men accused of being part of an Al Qaeda plot to poison masses of people in the UK. Of the nine originally charged, just one, Kamel Bourgass, was sentenced to imprisonment—and that was for the killing of a police officer and wounding several others and “conspiracy to cause a public nuisance.”

The verdict was an extraordinary one, given that the so-called “ricin terror plot” the nine were accused of masterminding played a central role in the government’s efforts to justify the war against Iraq and its accompanying “war on terror” that has been used to overturn fundamental civil liberties. These claims were repeated in banner headlines throughout the British media, which uncritically reported that a major Al Qaeda cell had been uncovered without a shred of evidence being advanced as proof.

On January 5, 2003, police raided a flat in Wood Green, north London and seized what was described as a “poisons laboratory,” said to include recipes for the deadly poison ricin and toxic nicotine. Shortly afterwards, Britain’s leading anti-terrorist police officer, David Veness, and the government’s deputy chief medical officer, Dr. Pat Troop, issued a joint statement that “a small amount of the material” taken from the London flat had “tested positive for the presence of ricin poison.”

The raid was sparked by allegations made by one Mohammad Meguerba to the authorities in Algeria that he was part of a group plotting ricin poison attacks in London. Meguerba gave the name Nadir Habra, believed to be Bourgass’s real name, as a key player, leading to the raid on the Wood Green flat.

Over the next days Prime Minister Tony Blair, government ministers and senior police officers lined up to proclaim that the poison find was proof that Islamic extremists were targeting Britain and that extraordinary measures were required to counter the threat.

On January 7, then Home Secretary David Blunkett and Health Secretary John Reid issued a joint statement that “traces of ricin” and castor beans capable of producing “one lethal dose” of the poison had been found to be present in the London flat. The same day, Blair told a meeting of British ambassadors that the raid underscored the dangers of “weapons of mass destruction”—a danger that “is present and real and with us now and its potential is huge.”

Newspapers speculated that the “poison” factory was being used to commit mass terror in the capital and elsewhere and even to target Blair for assassination.

On January 14, 2003, a raid by immigration police on a house in Manchester unexpectedly came across Bourgass. In a violent struggle, Bourgass stabbed police officer Stephen Oake to death and wounded three others as he tried to escape.

Consequently, a total of eight men in addition to Bourgass were detained at Belmarsh high security prison. The four Algerians who stood trial alongside Bourgass were Sidali Feddag, Mouloud Sihali, David Khalef and Mustapha Taleb. The prosecution charged that the five had conspired in two instances “in furtherance of their extremist Islamic cause” to commit murder between January 1, 2002 and January 23, 2003 in the UK,

and to commit a public nuisance by the use of poisons and/or explosives to cause disruption, fear and injury. Three other Algerian men, Samir Asli, Mouloud Bouhrama, Kamel Merzourg, and one Libyan, Khalid Alwerfeli, were to face trial separately on the same charges.

Press reports claimed that the men were part of an Al Qaeda cell that was plotting to poison hundreds of people in the UK with ricin by contaminating food supplies or smearing the material on door handles across north London.

The importance of this propaganda offensive was underlined when then-US Secretary of State Colin Powell drew attention to the arrests, as he pressed the case for war against Iraq in his speech to the United Nations Security Council on February 5, 2003. Claiming that “every statement I make today is backed up by sources, solid sources,” he spoke of a “sinister nexus between Iraq and the Al Qaeda terrorist network” that was plotting to conduct “poison and explosive attacks” throughout Europe. This assessment had been confirmed by events in Britain, Powell continued, “When the British unearthed a cell there just last month, one British police officer was murdered during the disruption of the cell.”

No evidence was presented to link the supposed conspirators in London with Baghdad, but this counted for nothing as far as Powell was concerned. For no evidence was ever produced linking the Baathist regime in Iraq with the Islamic fundamentalists who carried out the 9/11 terror attacks. But this did not stop London and Washington from insisting that Iraq be bombed to prevent Saddam Hussein from arming Al Qaeda and other terrorist groups with chemical, biological and even nuclear weapons.

Last week’s trial at the Old Bailey confirmed that Powell’s “solid sources” on the alleged ricin plot were as flimsy as all the other evidence that was concocted—much of it in Britain—to justify war against Iraq.

During one of the longest trials in British legal history, a jury in the nation’s top criminal court heard that there never was any ricin. An initial laboratory test that suggested ricin was present at the Wood Green flat was faulty, the court heard. This was at the same time that Blair, Blunkett and Reid were terrorising the public with their statements warning of plans for mass murder.

Nor were any other traces of poison, much less chemical or biological weapons, found during the raids. The “ricin factory” consisted of castor oil, cherry stones and apple seeds, and some handwritten recipes for ricin. Nevertheless, the prosecution claimed that these, as well as a “Manual of Afghan Jihad” seized in a separate raid in Manchester in 2000, were proof that the defendants were connected to Al Qaeda.

No such connection could be made. A report in the *Guardian* cites the powerful defence made in court by Bourgass’s barrister, Michel Massih. He derided the charges as “utter nonsense, complete and utter fantasy,” and queried why anyone would have to make a poison when it could be purchased relatively easily as weed killer or rat poison.

“What was really at the centre of the case, claimed Mr. Massih, was the build-up to the war in Iraq,” the newspaper reported. “The headline of the *Mirror* on January 8 2003, was ‘IT’S HERE’ and the accompanying

story suggested that a ‘deadly terror plan [had been] found’ in Britain. ‘It is around the time of the build-up to the war in the Middle East’, said Mr Massih. ‘You have a scenario which is almost begging for there to be something.... Then on January 8 this rubbish comes out’.

The idea that ricin could be used for mass murder was rejected in court by chemical experts. Professor Alistair Hay, one of the UK’s leading authorities on toxins, said that ricin had to be injected straight into a victim to be a reliable weapon and could not be effective by smearing it onto door handles as the prosecution charged that the plotters intended.

There was no ricin present in the flat and Hay said that any efforts by Bourgass to manufacture it were “incredibly amateurish and unlikely to succeed.”

Most of the allegations of Bourgass’s contacts with Al Qaeda came from Meguerba, who prosecuting QC Nigel Sweeny informed the trial judge—when the jury was absent—was unreliable and a liar.

Defence lawyer Gareth Peirce said that Meguerba “had clearly been tortured” in Algeria when he made his allegations, “and was actually trying to save his own neck by passing on whatever he thought might be of interest.” And when British investigators were able to question Meguerba in Algeria, he withdrew most of his allegations. The fact that the prosecution should try to build a case based on evidence extracted under torture was one of the most serious aspects of the trial, Peirce said.

Far from being an Al Qaeda mastermind, Bourgass was a disturbed loner and something of a fantasist—hence the decision not to convict him on the charge of conspiracy to murder. The jury also found that there was no evidence to link the other four defendants to any terror plot and they were acquitted. Mustapha Taleb was released immediately, but the other three pleaded guilty to having false immigration papers and face deportation. The collapse of the case meant that the trial pending against the four other North African men was abandoned, and they were officially cleared.

Speaking afterwards, Peirce demanded that the government justify the claims it had made against the men. “There was never any ricin, there were no poisons made. There seems to be a pathetic, clumsy, amateurish attempt to make some by a man who was conceded, I think by all, to be a difficult, anti-social loner,” she said.

“But I think one also has to consider how was it that all of us in this country were allowed to believe that there was ricin. That there was a substantial plot. That it wasn’t an individualist, tiny, failed attempt.”

The only conclusion that can be drawn from the flimsy evidence on which the men were brought to trial is that the decision to prosecute was taken for political purposes.

As was made clear by Powell’s speech at the UN, this was in the first instance in order to legitimise a criminal and predatory war against Iraq. It must be remembered that at the height of the war on March 31, 2003 allied propagandists returned once more to the “ricin plot” as alleged proof that Saddam Hussein had been secretly arming terrorist groups. US commanders in Iraq claimed to have destroyed a “poison factory,” although no chemicals or laboratories were found. General Richard Myers, US chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, claimed, “It is from this site that people were trained and poisons were developed which migrated to Europe. We think that’s probably where the ricin found in London came from.”

The “ricin plot” was not an isolated concoction. In November 2002 there were allegations of a separate Al Qaeda cell threat to gas the London underground. Amidst claims that the “bombers” were to be charged, MI5 and police sources were cited as having successfully foiled a major terrorist attack. But once again no plot existed and the three people supposedly linked to the gas attack were only charged with having false passports.

Intimately related to the drive to war was the government’s second aim in exaggerating and even manufacturing a threat of terrorist attacks—that

of justifying a major offensive against democratic rights in Britain.

Every manifestation of terrorism by Islamist groups and even individuals is routinely attributed to Al Qaeda, as if it is an all-encompassing and integrated network, under centralised command. In the name of fighting this threat, civil liberties have been abrogated by legislation that gives the government powers akin to a dictatorship.

Even the holding of the ricin trial became an occasion for the government to demonstrate its contempt for democratic rights. A media blackout was ordered to prevent reports prejudicing the trial that lasted until the acquittal, but in November 2004 then-Home Secretary David Blunkett publicly declared that “Al Qaeda is seen to be, and will be demonstrated through the courts over months to come, to be actually on our doorstep and threatening our lives. I am talking about people who are and about to go through the court system.”

The trial judge complained about Blunkett’s remarks to Attorney General Lord Goldsmith, but no action was taken. Goldsmith merely issued a warning that the minister should refrain from making prejudicial comments.

Blunkett’s intervention came as the government was preparing major new anti-terror legislation to be unveiled in the Queen’s speech later that month. This included the announcement of a Counter Terrorism Bill that included powers to implement trials without jury, civil orders for people suspected of planning “terrorist” attacks, as well as draft legislation for the introduction of identity cards.

Since then the government has introduced “control orders.” Rushed through Parliament last month, this measure means that anyone suspected of involvement in terrorism can now be held under house arrest—incommunicado and for an indefinite period—on the say-so of the home secretary or a judge.

Once again the “ricin plot” played a key role in justifying such measures. Following the trial’s collapse, the Home Office was forced to send a letter of apology to 10 men it had placed under control orders after it linked them to the supposed plot. The letter claims that the Home Office made a “clerical error” when it said the grounds for the orders imposed on them was that they “belonged to and have provided support for a network of north African extremists directly involved in terrorist planning in the UK, including the use of toxic chemicals.”

It is a testament to the jury that they refused to be part of the attempt to railroad innocent men to jail. It is little wonder that getting rid of the right to trial by jury is one of the government’s major aims.

In contrast, the gross perversion of democratic norms that constituted the ricin trial has attracted barely any comment by the official parties and by most of the media. All of them are complicit in sanctioning both an illegal war against Iraq and the ongoing assault on democratic rights in Britain. Indeed both issues are virtually off-limits in the ongoing general election campaign.

No section of the establishment will let truth stand in the way of developing the authoritarian forms of rule necessary in order to pursue Britain’s colonialist ambitions abroad and to smash up workers’ living standards at home. Rather, the response to the failure of the ricin trial will be to call for the further undermining of legal safeguards.

The *Mirror* editorialised that police had “not only put away a horribly dangerous man, but have disrupted a European terrorist network.” The *Times* warned: “this case is the most telling evidence yet that Britain has been the target of extremist terrorism and that official warnings should not be regarded as a political plot,” whilst the *Daily Star* declared ominously, “Hang this nut.” (There is no death penalty in Britain and right-wing elements have been clamouring for it to be reinstated.)

For the government, Home Secretary Charles Clarke said that the trial was “an illustration of the fact that terrorist organisations exist and are seeking to damage our lives.” Speaking as if the defendants had been freed on a technicality, he added, “We will obviously keep a very close

eye on the eight men being freed today, and consider exactly what to do in the light of this decision.”

Conservative leader Michael Howard used the case to reinforce his charge that the main crime of the government was that it was too soft on asylum seekers. Bourgass’s claims for asylum had been rejected but he had avoided deportation by using a series of false identities. “The tragedy of what happened is that Kamel Bourgass, an Al Qaeda operative, should not have been in Britain at all,” he said, arguing that the government had “lost control” of the country’s borders.

Determined not to be outflanked on the right by the Tories, Labour spokesmen insisted that the ability of Bourgass to evade detention proved the need to introduce identity cards. This was backed by Britain’s most senior police chief, Metropolitan Police Commissioner Sir Ian Blair, who said that legislation concerning “acts preparatory to terrorism” was needed, as Al Qaeda operates using “very loose-knit conspiracies.”



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