

Sensational charges, lurid headlines in alleged Toronto terrorist plot

Keith Jones
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The synopses provided by the prosecution to lawyers for the accused in the alleged Toronto terrorist conspiracy include sensational charges that have been seized on by the media to stoke up public outrage and fear.

The synopses claim that the Toronto group, which comprised 17 people, almost all of them young men or boys, plotted to storm the Parliament buildings in Ottawa, take members of Parliament hostage, and demand the withdrawal of Canadian troops from Afghanistan. They further charge that the group targeted the Toronto Stock Exchange, power plants, the Toronto headquarters of the Canadian Security Intelligence Service (CSIS), and the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation building in Toronto for possible bombing or armed seizure. A defense lawyer has reported that one of the defendants, 25-year-old Steven Chand, is alleged to have said he wanted to behead Conservative Prime Minister Steven Harper.

Taking its cue from the prosecution synopses, Canada's newspaper of record, the *Globe and Mail*, headlined its Wednesday edition, "STORM Parliament Hill; SEIZE the politicians; BEHEAD the prime minister."

During Tuesday's court appearance of most of the defendants, Chand's lawyer, Gary Batasar, read from the prosecution's eight-page synopsis of its overall case (there are also individual synopses, at least for each of the 12 adults alleged to be part of the conspiracy). He then discussed the synopses with reporters on the steps of the Brampton, Ontario, courthouse.

Batasar said he had decided to make public the allegations against his client in order to force prosecutors and police to provide information about their evidence against him and his alleged co-conspirators.

While the prosecution has made sweeping allegations, it has given defense lawyers virtually no information as to the evidentiary basis of its claims, and may well be preparing to deny the accused and their lawyers knowledge of key parts of the evidence against them. Under the Anti-Terrorism Act passed in December 2001, the Canadian state can, in the name of national security, deny persons charged with

terrorist crimes, their legal counsel, and the public from ever learning the exact nature and source of information used to convict them.

"The reason I came out in the media," said Batasar, "is to make sure that this is not something that is...dealt with secretly."

He accused the state authorities of stalling in making what in normal criminal cases is the routine, mandatory disclosure of evidence. "Do they have wiretaps? Do they have audiotapes or videotapes? We need a more thorough disclosure. When you get bald-faced allegations like this, obviously hysteria mounts."

Lawyers for the other accused have protested the refusal of authorities to allow them to meet with their clients in private and the exceptional conditions under which they are being held—solitary confinement, with all contact, even by telephone, with family members or anyone else, other than their lawyers, forbidden.

Defense lawyer Rocco Galati said that the right to private consultation with counsel was a "basic right that no...allegation colours or takes away from."

The denial of the accused of their basic rights is potentially a means of subjecting them to psychological pressure with the aim of extracting "voluntary" confessions.

A Crown representative was quick to point out that it was a defense lawyer who had revealed the allegations contained in the synopses, not the state. But this is disingenuous.

The authorities—the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP), the CSIS, the prosecution and the Conservative government—have used all means at their disposal since the police raids of June 2-3 to convince the public that they have smashed a well-organized conspiracy that threatened Canadians with one or more terrorist atrocities.

Not only have the CSIS and the police leaked details of the alleged terrorist conspiracy to the press, Prime Minister Steven Harper and his ministers have touted the Toronto conspiracy case as proof that Canada is in the front lines of the "war on terror." Court appearances of the alleged terrorists have become the occasion for major police

mobilizations, with police armed with submachine guns deployed in force, suggesting that there is a real risk of a commando-terrorist raid to free the accused.

In an interview with CBC radio Wednesday, Julian Falconer, a well-known civil rights and public advocacy lawyer, noted that Crown synopses are notorious in the legal community as “works of fiction,” since they present prosecution claims that are not subject to any real standards of evidence. What the prosecution is able to prove at trial often bears little resemblance to its pre-trial synopsis.

This is an important point. But there are other reasons for the public in Canada, the US and internationally to maintain a critical attitude to the claims of the government and state authorities as to the nature and import of the alleged terrorist threat.

It has been revealed that the CSIS and/or the RCMP have had at least some of the 17 under surveillance since 2004. According to an article in Wednesday’s *Globe and Mail*, “The arrests of 17 suspected Islamic extremists capped thousands of hours spent examining intercepted conversations and e-mails, long surveillance and stakeouts and countless conversations with informants.”

This inevitably raises the question of the timing of the raids and the announcement of charges. Why now?

Second, if the scenario outlined by authorities is true, it would appear that the closest the alleged terrorists ever came to getting their hands on the materials needed to construct a large bomb was when they contracted to buy ammonium nitrate garden fertilizer from a police operative. (Last weekend’s police raids took place after some of the accused reputedly took delivery of what they believed to be ammonium nitrate.)

Finally, the would-be terrorists appear to have been hapless—not the methodical, trained killers conjured up in government and police presentations. According to reports in the *Toronto Star*, a half-dozen of the accused drew so much attention to themselves when they trespassed on a farm in rural Ontario last December to engage in military-type training (playing paint-ball and firing off rounds of ammunition) that the police had to intervene to prevent local villagers from either scaring them off or inadvertently alerting them to the fact that they were under heavy police surveillance.

The *World Socialist Web Site* is not in a position to determine the truth of the allegations against the accused. But whatever the underlying facts, what is unmistakable is that the minority Harper Conservative government, with the assistance of the corporate media and a pliant parliamentary opposition, has seized on the purported Toronto terrorist plot to manipulate and stampede public opinion in favor of its right-wing agenda. This includes the expansion of the

Canadian Armed Forces’ intervention in Afghanistan, closer ties to the Bush administration, and the expansion of the powers of the police and security forces within Canada.

Particularly significant is the response of the New Democratic Party (NDP), nominally the “left” party within the Canadian political establishment, to the raid and the media fear-mongering surrounding it. No prominent representative of this party has adopted a critical attitude either to the substance of the charges, the methods employed by the RCMP and CSIS, the flouting of the defendants’ due process rights, or the manner in which the case is being exploited to shift the political climate in Canada in the direction of militarism and repression.

Instead, they have been at pains to stress their unqualified support for the government’s actions, so as to establish their credentials as full partners in the “war on terror.”

“We were all shocked to hear that such a thing could even possibly be happening in Canada,” NDP Leader Jack Layton said on Monday. He added, “This is a time to be calm, to be thankful that we have a security network with our police services that have been able to nip this thing in the bud.”

On Tuesday, according to the June 7 *National Post*, NDP Member of Parliament Yvon Godin declared that he and other MPs would “not be cowed” by the alleged plot to storm Parliament and take MPs hostage. Godin announced that the House of Commons was launching a new review of security on Parliament Hill.

Not the least of the Conservatives’ aims in exploiting the alleged terror plot is securing a majority in a future election. Although Harper and his ministers have been careful to present the smashing of a terrorist conspiracy as a victory for “Canada,” that is, in ostensibly non-partisan terms, an important theme of the Conservatives’ attacks on their political opponents, including in last month’s debate on whether to expand the Canadian intervention in Afghanistan, has been that the Liberals and other opposition parties are “soft” on terrorism.

For its part, the Bush administration is touting the Canadian “success” story in the anti-terror war to promote a friendly right-wing government and lend credence to its claims that there is a heightened danger of a new terrorist attack in the US.



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