Contradictions, anomalies, questions mount in UK terror scare

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A British court on Wednesday extended the warrants for 23 people held since August 10 in connection with the alleged plot to blow up commercial airliners flying from Britain to the US. An additional person was arrested Tuesday. The judge issued his ruling late in the evening following a closed-door hearing that lasted most of the day.

Under Britain's recently passed anti-terror law, suspected terrorists can be held for up to 28 days without being charged. Amid growing indications that the authorities lack firm evidence to back up their claims that the arrested men and women were on the verge of executing a terror attack on the scale of 9/11, there had been speculation in the press that at least some of the prisoners would be ordered released.

In the event, the judge gave the police more time to question the suspects, but refused to extend the warrants for the full period allowed by the anti-terror law. A police statement said the warrants for 21 of the suspects were extended until August 23 and for 2 others until August 21.

It is fair to surmise from the unusual length of the hearing and the limited extension of the warrants that the evidence presented by the authorities fell considerably short of constituting a hard and convincing case.

Indeed, one week on, it seems that the current alert is unravelling, and that it is of a similar type to previous "terror plots" that subsequently proved to involve nothing concrete, with much of the supposed evidence resulting from the activities of police informants working as agent provocateurs.

In this case, it transpires that not only were no bombs actually assembled, but none of the British-born Muslims being held had purchased airline tickets, and some did not even possess passports. Despite a massive trawling operation by police involving days of extensive searches at 46 separate locations, no trace has been found of chemicals that were supposedly to be used as explosives.

Yet on August 10, Home Secretary John Reid claimed security services had successfully foiled a terrorist conspiracy to "bring down a number of aircraft through midflight explosions" on the eve of its execution. Paul Stephenson, deputy commissioner of the Metropolitan Police, said chillingly, "This was intended to be mass murder on an unimaginable scale."

In the US, Homeland Security Secretary Michael Chertoff told a news conference that the plot was "a very sophisticated plan and operation" in which the suspects had "accumulated the capability necessary and they were well on their way,'' while President George Bush said it was a "stark reminder that this nation is at war with Islamic fascists."

As the UK's terror alert was raised to "critical" and airports across the country ground to a halt, stranding tens of thousands of passengers, the claims and rumours from largely unidentified sources continued. According to one account, two of those held—apparently husband and wife—plotted to use their six-month old baby as a decoy for their suicide mission above the Atlantic.

This, and similar lurid claims, were repeated by the establishment media as good coin, with no attempt made to substantiate them. Self-censorship on the part of the media played a major role, with the *Guardian*, for example, informing its readers that it knows "the precise location" of terror camps in the UK countryside, "but cannot disclose it."

Now, at least some sections of the media feel obliged to acknowledge widespread doubts as to the veracity of such claims. Yesterday's *Guardian* reported that the announcement of the alleged plot had caused broadcasters and newspapers to be "barraged with a wave of sceptical views" from "thousands of ordinary people." The same day, NBC's early morning "Today" programme in the US led its show with the question: "Is there a case?" Reporter Lisa Myers stated baldly that "there is no evidence that a bomb was tested in England or that explosives were prepared."

If some are beginning to distance themselves from the wild assertions made by the British and US authorities, it is with good cause. In addition to the absence of concrete evidence, many questions remain unanswered—not least, why the terror alert was raised only after large numbers of arrests had already been made?

With each passing day, the spectacular claims of a week ago look less and less convincing.

On August 15, the UK's Channel 4 News broadcast an exclusive interview with Amjad Sarwar, whose brother Assad was one of those arrested in the August 10 police raids in High Wycombe. For days, the media had reported that Amjad was also in detention, and his photograph had been splashed across the newspapers. But Amjad had never been arrested, much less questioned. He asked pointedly, "If they got this wrong, what else have they got wrong?"

His brother's arrest was also a mistake, Amjad insisted. "They've got it all wrong. He is an innocent guy....There is no way he could have anything to do with terrorism. He condemns terrorism." The police had "picked up an innocent person just because he had a beard," he said.

A neighbour of the Sarwars told the *Daily Mirror*, "They are perfect neighbours."

Other information suggests that the terror plot was concocted at US urging, utilising the willing services of the Pakistan government and its security services, which themselves are well known to have links with various terrorist organisations.

On August 13, the *Observer* newspaper published a timeline of the run-up to the terror raids. If its account is to be believed, neither the head of the Metropolitan Police's Special Operations department nor Britain's transport secretary had been informed until the last moment that a terrorist attack was "imminent."

According to the *Observer*, Transport Secretary Douglas Alexander was holidaying in Scotland when he was contacted on August 7 by an official in his office, advising him there's "something you need to know." A civil servant was apparently sent to Scotland to brief the minister on "an urgent terrorist threat—although at that stage it was not considered immediate."

Until late on Wednesday, August 9—only hours before the police raids

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and mass arrests—few outside an "elite" had any inkling "something was up," the newspaper continues. Amongst those in the dark was Andy Hayman, head of Special Operations with the Metropolitan Police, who, the *Observer* reports, was in Spain with his family. Late that evening, "colleagues rang to suggest he return immediately. His flight touched down shortly after 3 am on Thursday, soon after the majority of suspects had been picked up."

Yet President Bush had "known about the plot for some time," as did "City officials in New York," who, "several months ago...had been told that there was a major investigation going on in Britain."

The *Observer* states that Prime Minister Tony Blair had also discussed the alleged plot with Bush on Sunday, August 6, and again the day before the raids. Strangely, this did not prevent Blair leaving for his Caribbean holiday on Tuesday, August 8—just as his transport secretary was returning early from his own vacation.

Just as extraordinary is the fact that since then, apart from a few lines praising the security forces, the prime minister has not made any statement regarding what has been described as some of the "gravest" days ever experienced by the UK. Even as the airline carriers, which have lost millions of pounds, line up to denounce "nonsensical" security measures and demand an independent inquiry into the way the alleged terror threat was handled, Blair has remained silent.

A spokesman for the prime minister merely said, "If he had known on Monday night what he knew on Wednesday night, I don't think he would have gone on holiday."

This means either that earlier claims that Blair was in the loop and was briefing the US were false, or that the prime minister had reason to believe no major threat really existed, and/or that he was unaware that a major police operation would be mounted within 48 hours of his departure.

In so far as there is any effort to account for the fact that leading figures within the British government and police were apparently taken by surprise at developments, they revolve around the arrest of a Briton, Rashid Rauf, in Pakistan.

It is claimed that Rashid, described as the alleged plot's "mastermind," was detained late on Wednesday, August 9, causing an accomplice to make a "panicked telephone call to a British suspect, directing him to go ahead with the airliner plot," several reports said. The government and police, the story goes, had to take urgent measures to avert this disaster.

However, there are numerous conflicting accounts as to the timing of Rashid's arrest, with several reports that he has been in custody in Pakistan for more than one month. Similarly, the location of his arrest has been given variously as Karachi, Lahore, Bahawalpur and the Afghan border.

Moreover, as of yesterday, Pakistani authorities reported that there had been no request from Britain for Rashid's return. There is no extradition treaty between Britain and Pakistan, but such a request could be made under international conventions.

The so-called "Pakistan connection" raises even more questions.

Reports of the number of those detained by the Pakistani authorities vary from 7 to 17. The *Independent* newspaper noted, "Remarkably little information has emerged from Pakistan about the arrests. Well-connected journalists are complaining that their usual sources have dried up, which is unusual in Pakistan, where the intelligence services like to boast to journalists of their successes."

Any "details" that are supplied by Pakistan must be regarded as suspect. Notorious for its use of torture, it is one of the favoured destinations for CIA "rendition" flights. The *Guardian* cited Ali Hasan, a researcher for Human Rights Watch, that "torture was endemic and that there was no doubt it would have been used on Mr Rauf."

The Pakistan government has used its role in the alleged terror plot to curry favour with Washington. Prime Minister Shaukat Aziz told a rally marking Pakistan's 59th anniversary of independence that his government's role in disrupting the alleged plot proved it was fighting terrorism "along with the world community."

This has not stopped government and intelligence agencies of various countries briefing at odds with one another. Pakistan officials have been keen to insist that Rashid was arrested on the Afghan border as he crossed into Pakistan, but this has been flatly rejected by the Afghan authorities and British security sources, who told the *Independent* that some of the statements from Pakistani officials should be "treated with circumspection."

Britain and Pakistan are also at odds over allegations that the terror plot was to be financed through charitable donations for the victims of last October's devastating earthquake in northern Pakistan.

News reports in the UK suggested that monies intended to finance terrorist activity had been transferred between Britain and Pakistan, disguised as charitable donations to the earthquake relief fund. Rashid and his brother Tayib, who was amongst those arrested in Birmingham last Thursday, are reportedly involved in the charity Crescent Relief, which raised funds for the earthquake's victims.

If confirmed, this would be of no surprise. Those of Kashmiri origin make up the largest number of Pakistani immigrants to Britain, and this was the area hit especially hard by the quake. Tens of thousands made donations and organised collections for the victims, and hundreds more travelled to the region to help directly.

The British press has stated that there was "no suggestion" that Crescent Relief was "aware that funds may have been siphoned off." It has been less cautious as regards another earthquake charity, Jumaat ud Dawa, which the *Independent* described as "the charitable arm of a Kashmiri terrorist group, Lashkar-e-Taiba, which has been banned by the Pakistani government after pressure from the US government."

Yahya Mujahid, from Jamaat Ud Dawa, issued an angry denial, stating, "We have nothing to do with this alleged plot and have no link to this. There is no logic to what the US is doing."

On August 15, Tasnim Aslam, for Pakistan's Foreign Office, described the charge against the charity as "absurd." He said, "These are all absurd stories, and the objective is to malign Pakistan and to cast a shadow on efforts made by Pakistan to uncover and foil this terrorist plot."

She told a news briefing, "Rashid Rauf has nothing to do with any charity involved in the earthquake relief work or with any relief work as such. There is absolutely no connection." According to other reports, British intelligence is said to be trying to establish if there is a connection between those detained in last Thursday's raids and the July 7, 2005, bombings in London. Why, after those arrested were reportedly tailed for one year, and their e-mails, phone calls and Internet connections intercepted and scrutinised, police would still be "trying to establish" such a connection is again not explained.

But the *Los Angeles Times* noted another anomaly. Regarding claims that the plot was to involve 20 suicide bombers on board up to 10 aircraft, it states that "some intelligence analysts in the US and Europe wonder whether the alleged operatives, who included a 21-year-old who converted to Islam only six months ago, had the expertise to pull off the ambitious attack under pressure."

Indeed, details on those held seem widely at odds with the claims made by government and the police, and repeated by the media.

Aside from their youth—the oldest is 35 and the youngest 17—and the fact that most are British-born Muslims of Pakistani descent, there does not appear to be a single consistent link between any of them. And in many instances, friends, relatives and acquaintances have categorically rejected all allegations of terrorist involvement.

Tayib Rauf, 22, works in his father's cake business. On Tuesday, his friend, Mohammed Nazam, released video footage of Tayib taken just hours before his home was raided. It shows him strolling through Nazam's store discussing business matters. Nazam said he had been with

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Tayib until 2:30 a.m. the day of his arrest.

"He probably still had my check in his pocket when he was picked up—around four in the morning—from his home. If he were a person involved in a gang, he wouldn't be sitting with me chatting, would he?"

Umar Islam, 28 (born Brian Young), converted to Islam two or three years ago. He is married and has a young child. The *Sun* newspaper reported that Umar "helped shield the public" during the London bombings, hunting for other bombs in his job as a bus ticket inspector.

"His actions are at dramatic odds with allegations he now faces of being part of a plot to blow transatlantic jets out of the sky," the *Sun* acknowledged. The newspaper cited a work colleague reporting, "He was certainly committed to what he was doing. You couldn't fault him at all. On that day he was trying to save lives, not destroy them."

Waheed Zaman, 22, a biomedical science student, is head of the Islam Society at London Metropolitan University. His childhood friend, Kamran Siddique, described him as a football fan "who dreamed of being a doctor," who dressed in "a combination of Western and Islamic attire," had "many white, Asian and black friends," and who had been elected head of the Islamic society "because of his moderate ways."

Waheed Arafat Khan, 24, is also described as having the "appearance of being perfectly integrated into Western society." Neighbours reportedly described him as "thoughtful, considerate and polite."

Ibrahim (formerly Oliver) Savant, another recent convert to Islam, is a secretary with an East London music firm. Described as an avid England football supporter, he lives with his wife and his English mother Marilyn and Iranian father Ibrahim, whose name he is believed to have taken when he converted. His brother, Adam, also a company director, described himself as "outraged, shocked and angry" at the arrest.

Abdul Waheed (born Don Stewart-Whyte), 21, is the son of a Conservative Party agent, Doug Stewart-Whyte, who died nine years ago. A former art student, he had a reputation as a playboy until converting to Islam approximately six months ago, along with his sister Heidi, and marrying a Muslim girl.

Two brothers arrested, Shazad Khuram Ali, 27, and Haider Ali, 30, run their own business importing sports cars. They are said to be close friends with Waseem Kayani, 29, a taxi driver who was also arrested. A friend said, "There is no way he would blow himself up. He just got married."

Osman Adam Khatib, 20, was described by his English neighbour as "someone with a good heart."

It is such gaping discrepancies that are now leading to open speculation that there might be another reason for last Thursday's alert.

Craig Murray was the British ambassador to Uzbekistan until his removal in 2004, he says for criticising the Uzbek regime's human rights record. In a commentary posed on the *Global Research* web site, he writes: "We then have the extraordinary question of Bush and Blair discussing the possible arrests over the weekend. Why? I think the answer to that is plain. Both in desperate domestic political trouble, they longed for 'Another 9/11.' The intelligence from Pakistan, however dodgy, gave them a new 9/11 they could sell to the media. The media has bought, wholesale, all the rubbish they have been shovelled."

He notes that British Home Secretary John Reid had made a speech just hours before the raids "warning us all of the dreadful evil threatening us and complaining that 'Some people don't get' the need to abandon all our traditional liberties. He then went on, according to his own propaganda machine, to stay up all night and minutely direct the arrests. There could be no clearer evidence that our Police are now just a political tool."

Writing in the *Daily Mail*, Stephen Glover worried lest "it transpires that the plot was less advanced, and less potentially apocalyptic in its effects, than Dr. Reid has suggested."

If so, it would mean not only that "this government's already shaky credibility would be shattered," but "the effect on public opinion of 'crying wolf' once again would be disastrous."

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