

Britain: questions remain over alleged terror plot

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It is now more than two weeks since police claimed to have thwarted an imminent plan to explode up to a dozen transatlantic jets mid-flight.

In the early hours of August 10, 24 people were detained under anti-terrorist legislation that allows suspects to be held for up to 28 days without charge. At the same time emergency security measures were imposed at British airports, causing chaos and delays. Metropolitan Police chief Paul Stephenson said these were crucial as the alleged terrorists intended to cause “mass murder on an unimaginable scale.”

Such has been the resulting fear and panic that not a day passes without news of an aircraft being turned back mid-flight due to security concerns, or of passengers ordered off planes because others deem them “suspicious.”

Yet to date, no concrete details of the supposed plot have been produced and even as charges have been laid, the contradictions and questions over the official presentation of events continue to mount.

What is certain is that a terrorist attack was not “imminent” as originally claimed. No bombs existed and none of those allegedly involved had even brought plane tickets. Some do not have passports.

Indeed, it is now almost routinely accepted that the security measures imposed at airports were unwarranted. The *Guardian*, for example, states, “it seems the measures forced upon British airports for several days were unnecessary.”

This is an extraordinary admission, but the *Guardian* does not question why the government and police imposed such “unnecessary” measures, despite the massive disruption and huge financial costs they incurred.

Throughout the current terror scare the mass media has acted as the propaganda arm of the state, repeating every allegation, no matter how lurid, without making any effort to substantiate them, and quickly burying those that turned out to be bogus. And whereas in the first days of the arrests, the media was filled with supposed details of the alleged plot, the suspects involved and possible connections to Al Qaeda, 9/11 and the July 7, 2005 attacks in London, now there is virtual silence.

In the last days eight people have been charged with conspiracy to murder and preparing acts of terrorism. Three others are charged with withholding information on a possible terrorist act and another, a 17-year-old boy, with “possessing articles useful to a person preparing acts of terrorism.” All have indicated their intention to plead not guilty.

On Wednesday police were given a further week to continue questioning eight others. The same day, two individuals were released without charge, Heathrow airport worker Asim Tariq, 23, and Tayib Rauf, 22.

For weeks the Rauf family has been presented as central to the alleged plot. The media, citing anonymous security sources, had claimed that it was the arrest of Tayib’s brother, Rashid, in Pakistan that prompted the sudden raids in Britain.

Violating the presumption of innocence, Tayib’s name and photograph—along with those of many of the others detained—had been splashed across newspapers and his assets frozen by the Bank of England. (Amjad Sarwar, whose brother Assad was one of those detained on

August 10, had also been publicly identified as another of the suspects, even though he had never been arrested or even questioned).

Rashid has been described as the organiser of the supposed plot, an Al Qaeda operative who allegedly used monies from a charity in which he and Tayib were reportedly involved to fund a terrorist conspiracy. Earlier this week the charity’s assets were frozen and an investigation begun into the claims.

There has been little word on Rashid since these allegations were made. Apparently detained by Pakistani intelligence, reports allege that he has been tortured. The British government has refused to say if it has requested Rashid’s extradition, whilst reports from Pakistan deny he has any connection to Al Qaeda and suggest that despite weeks of interrogation there is no evidence he is a terrorist “mastermind.”

In another strange turn, police announced Thursday they had charged Umair Hussain, 24, with failing to disclose information which could help prevent an act of terrorism. His brother, Mehran Hussain, 23, had been charged with the same offence 24 hours before. Both are accused of failing to reveal information on their brother Nabeel. But Nabeel, one of those still under arrest, has yet to be charged with any offence himself.

Umair’s solicitor Tim Ruskin said he was “shocked” that his client had been charged. “We are certainly considering a judicial review into what may well be an abuse of process,” he said, adding that Umair “has instructed me to complain about the strip searching that occurred at Belgravia police station. Also the impression that we got that some parts of the private legal consultations may have been monitored.”

These are not the only anomalies. More fundamentally, nothing has been produced to suggest the alleged plot existed in any meaningful sense.

This is implicit in the obscure wording of the charge against eight of the suspects, for having “engaged in conduct to give effect to their intention to smuggle the component parts of improvised explosive devices on to aircraft and assemble and detonate them on board.” It is not clear what engaging in “conduct to give effect to an intention” means? Does this bureaucratic double-talk refer to assembling bombs, talking of doing so, thinking about it?

The police are equally vague, even when outlining the “facts” of the alleged plot. At a press conference announcing the first charges, Metropolitan Police Deputy Commissioner Peter Clarke outlined the extensive investigation which, he said, had “given us a clearer picture of the alleged plot.”

But earlier this month, Britain’s Home Secretary John Reid and the Metropolitan Police, along with US President George Bush and the Department of Homeland Security, had supposedly set out a very clear picture of the plot.

As repeated endlessly by the media, it was said to involve hiding chemicals in carry-on luggage, which were then to be mixed into explosive material on board and detonated with electrical devices. A senior UK “government security source” was cited in the media stating, “The biggest breakthrough was discovering how they planned to carry out

the atrocities, which would have eclipsed 9/11.”

Such precise information was available, it was claimed, because the suspects had been under surveillance for months—their telephone and internet communications had been intercepted and they had been tailed by special agents, one of whom was even said to be spying on them from within the “group.” Indeed, so familiar were police with the alleged plot that they were able to apprehend all the suspects almost simultaneously.

Still speculation had been rife as to how it would be possible to detonate up to ten separate flights at the same time but only days ago Reid said it was “relatively simple” to make bombs on an aircraft and there was “no question” that terrorists were capable of such actions.

At Monday’s press conference Clarke stated that police had found “bomb making equipment. There are chemicals including hydrogen peroxide, electrical components, documents and other items,” he said.

Previously, police sources had asserted that the alleged plot involved the use of Triacetone Triperoxide (TATP). It has been pointed out, however, that the use of TATP in the scenario initially outlined is highly implausible. An article in the *Register*, drawing on a 2004 scientific peer-review study in the *Journal of American Chemical Society*, explained that “Making a quantity of TATP sufficient to bring down an airplane is not quite as simple as ducking into the toilet and mixing two harmless liquids together.”

Even should one obtain an adequate concentration of hydrogen peroxide in sufficient quantities, along with the necessary amounts of acetone and sulphuric acid, place them in containers along with frozen gel-packs (needed to keep them cool) and all the laboratory equipment necessary to mix them, and manage to smuggle all these on board an aircraft, that would be the easy part.

It would then be necessary to move the chemicals and equipment “discreetly” into the toilet to begin carefully mixing the various components together in exactly the right quantities and to the correct temperature, the *Register* continued.

“After a few hours—assuming, by some miracle, that the fumes haven’t overcome you or alerted passengers or the flight crew to your activities—you’ll have a quantity of TATP with which to carry out your mission. Now all you need to do is dry it for an hour or two,” it stated. Even then, however, the quality would be nowhere near sufficient to cause “mass murder.”

Police seem to have dropped claims that TATP was involved. But Clarke’s reference to the discovery of hydrogen peroxide clarifies nothing as it has numerous domestic uses and can be found in some form in most homes. Moreover, given that an explosion was reportedly to be triggered by I-pods or cameras, it is not clear if these are what Clarke was referring to when he spoke of police retrieving “electrical components.”

However, it will be a long time before the “evidence” apparently uncovered by police can be tested in public. Reports indicate it could be three years before those charged are brought to trial.

Such a time duration is itself a gross abuse of due process, but Craig Murray, British ambassador to Uzbekistan until his removal in 2004, has pointed to another—the involvement of the supposedly independent Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) with the police investigation.

It is the CPS which is meant to weigh police evidence and come to an impartial decision on whether charges should be brought. Murray pointed out the significance of the statement by CPS head Susan Hemmings that she had “been working with the police full time at New Scotland Yard for the last eight days.”

Did this mean, he queried, that the CPS unit that took the decision to press charges against many of the accused “was actually ‘embedded’ with the police investigation in Scotland Yard? Was a party to the turmoil, excitement and indeed hype that has characterised this investigation?”

“Does anyone know if the CPS has ever physically moved itself to Scotland Yard before in any previous case?” he asked.

Murray has also said he learned from “the mainstream media” (Sky News, in fact) that Blair and Bush had been heard discussing the timing of the arrests almost a week before they took place. And there have been numerous reports that the raids were triggered at US insistence, and that despite misgivings amongst British security personnel, Blair again fell obediently into line.

It is evident that the absence of any immediate terror threat means the security alert can only have been raised for political reasons—namely to divert attention from the crisis engulfing Bush and Blair under conditions of growing domestic opposition to the Iraq war, and the deepening military and political debacle in that country, as well as in Afghanistan and Lebanon.

Indeed, a consistent modus operandi can be identified in recent terror scares. A plot is apparently uncovered, the details of which are sensationalised by the media as arrests are made, and police and politicians line up to warn of the grave dangers involved.

When the case finally comes to court—if it even gets that far—it usually turns out that many of the claims were fabricated and/or the outcome of the actions of agent provocateurs. By that time, the “plot” has served its real purpose in helping to create a climate of officially induced hysteria and a clamp down on civil liberties.

Such is the notorious record of the so-called ricin plot. In January 2003, police claimed to have uncovered operations at a “poisons laboratory” in north London involving recipes for ricin and toxic nicotine that were to be released in public places. It was reported that chemical tests had proven positive, as Blair claimed “weapons of mass destruction” were being prepared on British soil.

The ricin scare was used as part of Washington and London’s justification for invading Iraq. But when the case came to trial in April 2005, it turned out that there was never any ricin, just castor oil, cherry stones and apple seeds. The positive test was faulty and subsequent negative results did not come to light for more than one year due to “errors.” Eight people were cleared of all charges (a ninth was convicted on a separate charge).

Whatever the final outcome of the latest “plot,” it is being used for similar reactionary ends.



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