

Pakistan drops terrorism charges against key suspect in Heathrow bomb plot

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On December 13, in an extraordinary turn of events, a court in Pakistan dropped terrorism charges against British-born Rashid Rauf.

Rauf is the alleged “ringleader” of the most infamous terror plot ever apparently uncovered in Britain—the plan to explode a number of transatlantic airlines en route from London’s Heathrow airport.

Details of the court hearing are extremely limited. But according to reports, a judge at an anti-terrorism court in Rawalpindi said that the case against Rauf did not “fall into the category of terrorism.”

Rauf’s lawyer, Hashmat Habib, said no evidence had been provided to back up claims that his client was part of a conspiracy to hijack airplanes, and the judge agreed to strike out the two charges against Rauf relating to terrorism. “That practically means that Rashid Rauf has been acquitted of charges relating to terrorism,” Habib said.

Rauf has been transferred to the jurisdiction of a civil court on charges of possessing explosives and forged travel and identity documents. Habib says that the explosive Rauf is accused of possessing is hydrogen peroxide, but that he had told the court “that this is an antiseptic chemical that is also used for healing wounds.” The remaining charges were “minor,” Habib said, “and we hope to see him free.”

The *Times* of London claimed that the “dramatic ruling...is being seen as part of an agreement to speed up his return to the UK where Scotland Yard detectives want to question Mr. Rauf about the Heathrow plot and his possible links to the 7/7 suicide bombers in London.”

However, this does not square with the newspaper’s report that British police have been unable to question Rauf since he was arrested by Pakistani agents in August. This is despite repeated claims that the British

authorities had struck an agreement for Rauf’s extradition to the UK.

Moreover, according to the *Guardian*, far from being part of a choreographed move by British and Pakistani authorities, the judge’s decision to drop the terrorism charges against Rauf “surprised British security and intelligence officials.” The newspaper also states that British officials are seeking Rauf’s extradition in connection “to an earlier allegation dating to April 2002”—thought to involve the killing of his maternal uncle—and not in connection to the alleged Heathrow plot.

It was supposedly Rauf’s arrest in Pakistan on August 9 that triggered a series of raids and arrests across the country and the imposition of emergency security measures at airports across the UK, bringing air travel to a virtual standstill.

Senior police officers and leading British and US officials lined up to insist the arrests had prevented an imminent bombing campaign aimed at creating “mass murder on an unimaginable scale.” According to reports at the time, this arrest had led one of Rauf’s accomplices to make a “panicked telephone call to a British suspect, directing him to go ahead with the airliner plot,” which was said to involve smuggling onboard up to 10 aircraft liquid chemical explosives disguised as beverages.

With some 25 people arrested, 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. 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” to achieving their objectives.

Amidst an atmosphere of fear and apprehension, anonymous Pakistani intelligence officials briefed that the plot had been prepared by Al Qaeda, with Rauf as its mastermind. According to some reports in the British press, a husband and wife who were amongst those arrested had plotted to use their six-month-old baby as a decoy for their suicide mission. On August 11, the Financial Sanctions section of the Bank of England named 19 of those detained and froze their assets.

Within weeks, it transpired that no bombs actually existed and that none of the British-born Muslims detained had even purchased airline tickets. Some did not even have passports. Moreover, despite claims that the alleged conspirators had been under surveillance for months, it was revealed that neither the head of the Metropolitan Police’s Special Operations department nor Britain’s transport secretary had been told that a terror attack was “imminent” until the last moment.

Eleven people were finally charged with terrorist offences. It could be several years before their cases come to court.

The decision by the Pakistan court to drop the terror charges against Rauf not only confirms that there was no imminent terror attack. It supports the claims that the Heathrow terror plot was concocted by Washington and London—with the support of much of the media in both countries—so as to divert from the growing political crisis of the Bush and Blair governments, under conditions in which the full extent of the military debacle in Iraq was being laid bare, fuelling opposition to the war and occupation.

This latest development has, moreover, further exposed the role of the official media as little more than propaganda outlets for the ruling elite. In contrast to the weeks of headlines and sensationalised reporting that accompanied the supposed discovery of the Heathrow plot, the dropping of terror charges against Rauf rated just a few column inches.

As an article on the *Atlantic Free Press* web site December 15, by Craig Murray—formerly Britain’s Ambassador to Uzbekistan until his removal in October 2004—makes clear, this is of a piece.

Referring to accounts by the press in August, citing unnamed police sources, that a “suitcase” containing “bomb-making materials” had been recovered from

woodland near to the homes of some of those arrested, Murray reveals that this claim was subsequently described “to me by a security service source as ‘A lot of rubbish from someone’s garage dumped in the woods.’ ”

This lies behind the decision by Thames Valley police to abandon their search of the woods, Murray reports. Five months after the claims of a planned terrorist atrocity “bigger than 9/11,” the police informed the Home Office on December 12 that they would only continue with the search if the government met the costs.

Murray also reports that other “evidence” it was claimed police had uncovered at the time is similarly without substance. Wills made by the would-be suicide bombers were found to be “made in the early ’90s by volunteers going off to fight the Serbs in Bosnia” and left with the deceased relative of one of those detained in the Heathrow raids. As to the map of Afghanistan also supposedly recovered, it “had been copied out by an 11-year-old boy.”

“All of which is well known to the UK media, but none of which has been reported for fear of prejudicing the trial,” Murray continues. “I am at a complete loss to understand why it does not prejudice the trial for police to announce in a blaze of worldwide front-page publicity that they have found bomb-making materials, wills and maps. Only if you contradict the police is that prejudicial. Can anyone explain why?”

He adds, “Five British newspapers had to pay damages to a Birmingham man they accused, on security service briefing, of being part of the plot. Only the *Guardian* had the grace to publish the fact and print a retraction.”



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