Security alert ties up US air cargo shipments

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Air cargo shipments across the Atlantic and along the US East Coast were brought to a standstill Friday in a terrorism scare that included searches of cargo planes and hangars in New York, Newark and Philadelphia.

Fighter jets escorted a passenger jet from the United Arab Emirates to New York's JFK airport, allegedly because of a single package from Yemen in the aircraft's cargo. Canadian Air Force jets first intercepted Emirates Airways Flight 201 as it entered North American airspace, and F-16s picked up the plane at the US border in northern New York state.

On the ground, there was an extensive mobilization of New York Police Department (NYPD), FBI and fire department forces outside a UPS terminal in Long Island City and another in Brooklyn, which shut down the Manhattan Bridge and part of Flatbush Avenue in pursuit of a package carried inside a UPS truck. The package was described as "an envelope from Yemen" in one press account. An NYPD x-ray found that it contained nothing but bank receipts.

The terrorism scare dominated the US media Friday, culminating in a late afternoon press conference at the White House where President Obama made a perfunctory statement lasting barely a minute. Terrorism adviser John Brennan and press secretary Robert Gibbs then conducted a longer press briefing that raised more questions than it answered.

The officials said that two packages containing at least traces of explosives had been tracked down on cargo planes bound for the United States. They said that the packages had been shipped from Yemen, one by Fedex and the other by UPS, and claimed that the terrorist group Al Qaeda of the Arabian Peninsula was likely responsible.

Both packages were addressed to Jewish groups in Chicago, one a synagogue, the other a community center. The UPS package was intercepted at the East Midlands airport in Britain, the Fedex package at Dubai in the United Arab Emirates.

Brennan said that a tip from an unnamed overseas intelligence service led to the packages, not a random screening of US-bound cargo. He said he had briefed Obama about the threat Thursday night after the tip was received but before the packages had been located.

Subsequent press reports named the source of the tip as Saudi Arabia and gave additional details of the two packages, both of them toner cartridges packed inside laser printers. However, the exact nature and quantity of the explosive material has not been disclosed.

The cartridges had been tampered with in an obvious fashion, with wires sticking out of them and running to external circuit boards and a dusting of white powder on top. They were then concealed inside the printers. A British press report cited a police description of the device found in East Midlands as "cleverly disguised" and linked to a mobile phone.

There is already speculation in the American media about new security measures for air cargo shipments. The Department of Homeland Security (DHS) issued a statement announcing new and unspecified actions. "Some of these security measures will be visible while others will not," the DHS statement said.

It continued: "The public may recognize specific enhancements including heightened cargo screening and additional security at airports. Passengers should continue to expect an unpredictable mix of security layers that include explosives trace detection, advanced imaging technology, canine teams and pat downs, among others."

The terrorism scare is one of a long series of such episodes that have become a regular part of American public life—and a predictable part of the manipulation of public opinion in the final week before a major US election.

The facts of the incident are unclear and many questions have been raised about inconsistencies in the

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official story, but these details are less important than the media barrage that surrounds them.

The American people are assailed by hours of breathless coverage, with television anchormen and reporters speculating on potential consequences, including the possible shooting down of the Emirates Airway jet and its full complement of passengers and crew.

Nothing in the public description of the purported attack warrants the type of saturation coverage devoted to it. On the contrary, it appears that the manufacture of a scare atmosphere is an end in itself. It is required as a justification for the continuous expansion of the vast security apparatus of the American government and the endless escalation of US wars, and for maintaining social control over the population of the United States.

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