

Cash Transfers 'Link Bin Laden To Attacks'

by Patrick McGowan
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Investigators in the United States are said to have discovered the crucial connection linking Osama bin Laden to the terrorist attacks on 11 September.

The connection is a financial one and has been described as the "smoking gun" sought by America's allies to justify their support for military action.

Sheikh Saeed, who was Bin Laden's financial adviser when he was based in Sudan and who is still paymaster for his al Qaeda organisation, is reported to have had direct contact with Mohammed Atta, the ringleader of the hijackers.

Investigators have traced money transfers to Florida - where the hijackers were living and learning to fly - from an account under Saeed's name. He is also known as Mustafa Mohamed Ahmad. The transfers were made on 8 and 9 September. Atta and his co-hijackers are also said to have sent money back to the account just before launching their suicide mission - a typical piece of tradecraft from the al Qaeda organisation, which closely controlled expenses of its would-be martyrs.

Although evidence of Bin Laden's involvement was growing it was largely circumstantial until investigators uncovered the electronic trail of financial transactions involving Saeed. He was based in Dubai and from there sent tens of thousands of dollars to terrorists living in Germany and Florida. Saeed is said to have fled from Dubai on a flight to Karachi on the day of the attacks in the United States.

In Dubai, the UAE central bank has now ordered the freezing of accounts linked to Saeed and other organisations named by the US Treasury last week as being linked to al Qaeda. Intelligence chiefs in Europe and the US are said to be almost certain that the al Qaeda terrorist network is likely to mount another major outrage soon. The question for the planners in the Bush administration is whether the attack will come before America and its allies can strike at Taliban and al Qaeda bases in Afghanistan.

It is feared that another atrocity before US forces are seen to hit back could cause major civil unrest in the US, according to some Bush advisers.

US, British and European intelligence and police have been taken aback at the sheer extent of the militant groups associated in one form or another with Bin Laden's al Qaeda network and subversive activity against western governments. Meanwhile, a worldwide hunt is under way for 14 young Muslims said to have been trained in secret to fly Boeing airliners at an airbase in Afghanistan.

A senior pilot for the Afghan state-owned airline Ariana has told how he and four colleagues were forced by the Taliban regime to train the men who are now thought to be hiding in Europe and the United States. The 14 men, seven of whom are said to speak fluent English, are described as "dedicated Muslim fanatics" who spoke of being involved in a holy war.

They are thought to have left Afghanistan a year ago. All had close links with the Taliban and some had fought for the regime.

Today police are continuing to question a terrorist suspect arrested at Gatwick on Friday as he prepared to board a flight to the United States. The 36-year-old was following a similar route to the 11 suicide hijackers who passed through Britain from Dubai earlier this year.

Detectives also hope to question further Algerian pilot Lotfi Raissi, said in court on Friday to be a key figure in the training of the hijackers. They want to know who he may have trained to fly in recent months.

The US is hoping to extradite Raissi, who lived near Heathrow.

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