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Posted on Wed, Jun. 12, 2002

U.S. questions 2nd dirty-bomb suspect

BOB DROGIN, ERIC LICHTBLAU JOSH MEYER
Los Angeles Times

WASHINGTON - U.S. authorities overseas have interrogated a second suspect in the al-Qaida plot to detonate a radioactive bomb in America, officials said Tuesday, as investigators scrambled to determine if other accomplices are in the United States or elsewhere.

U.S. officials also said the so-called "dirty bomb" plan apparently called for stealing radioactive material from an unidentified American university laboratory. Low-level nuclear isotopes are widely used in medicine, research and other fields.

The plot, which was still in its early stages, was uncovered when CIA, FBI, Customs and State Department agents successfully identified and tracked Jose Padilla -- a Brooklyn-born Muslim convert who adopted the name Abdullah al Muhajir -- in Cairo, Egypt, and Zurich, Switzerland. He was arrested May 8 when he flew from Switzerland to Chicago on what officials called a scouting mission for a terrorist attack.

President Bush said Padilla was one of many "would-be killers" the United States has captured and that it is looking for many more.

"This guy Padilla's one of many who we've arrested," Bush said in a meeting in his Cabinet Room. "The coalition we've put together has hauled in 2,400 people. And you can call it 2,401 now. There's just a full-scale manhunt on.... We will run down every lead, every hint. This guy Padilla's a bad guy, and he is where he needs to be: detained."

Officials said Padilla has refused to cooperate since his arrest. After Bush decided Sunday that Padilla should be held as an "enemy combatant" against the United States, rather than as a criminal defendant, the suspect was flown by military C-130 aircraft to a high-security Navy brig outside Charleston, where he has been isolated from other inmates and is under heavy military guard.

On Tuesday, Padilla's lawyer told a federal court hearing in New York that Padilla's continued detention was a violation of the Constitution because he had not been charged and was being denied access to legal counsel. "My client is a citizen," Donna Newman told reporters. "He still has constitutional rights."

Members of the Senate Intelligence Committee were given a classified, closed-door briefing on the case Tuesday as part of their wide-ranging review into the Sept. 11 intelligence failure. But some members came away with more questions than answers, a congressional source said.

"The concern we'd like to pursue is, what's the substance of this? Not many people were satisfied that we had a whole hell of a lot" on Padilla in terms of hard evidence, the source said. "We're all for sticking bad guys in the hole, but you've got to have evidence."

A senior U.S. intelligence official said Pakistan detained a second suspect in the plot last month. The official said the man, who has not been publicly identified but is from an Arab country in the Middle East, is being interrogated by U.S. authorities at an undisclosed location. There were conflicting reports as to whether Pakistan had handed the suspect over to U.S. authorities.

The second suspect traveled with Padilla to eastern Afghanistan last fall to meet Abu Zubaydah, al-Qaida's operations chief, and later accompanied Padilla to secret meetings with other senior al-Qaida

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leaders inside Pakistan to discuss the dirty-bomb proposal as well as potential attacks against hotels, gas stations and other targets, the official said.

One of the most urgent aspects of the investigation is whether Padilla had other accomplices, particularly in the United States.

"He clearly had associates, and one of the things we want to ask him about is who those associates were and how we can track them down," Deputy Defense Secretary Paul Wolfowitz said on CBS's "Early Show."

U.S. intelligence officials said they had not determined whether Padilla was a seasoned al-Qaida operative who had escaped detection until recently, or was a vagabond free-lance agent who somehow made contact with senior al-Qaida leaders last fall and was embraced by the group.

Padilla got his new passport in March, but the local consular official in Pakistan was concerned Padilla might be involved in a case of identity theft.

"It was after the passport was issued that the consular officer just felt there was something odd about the case and raised it to the attention of the regional security officer, who looked into it and then reported to the other elements of the consulate, including the FBI," State Department spokesman Richard Boucher said Tuesday.

The discovery that Padilla had a criminal record in Florida and Illinois led to questions about why he was in Pakistan. The information was forwarded to joint terrorism task forces, led by the FBI, in Miami and Chicago.

The investigation picked up steam after FBI and CIA agents, working with Pakistani authorities, captured Zubaydah, the alleged operations chief for al-Qaida in a raid in the Pakistani city of Faisalabad on March 28.

During an interrogation in April, Zubaydah told authorities he was approached late last year at his hide-out in Khost, eastern Afghanistan, by an American and another man who proposed building a dirty bomb for use in the United States, according to intelligence officials.

"He didn't identify him, or give a name, just a generic description of him," one official said. "It was fairly sketchy information."



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