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'**Dirty Bomb**' Plot Uncovered, U.S. Says; Suspected Al Qaeda Operative Held as 'Enemy Combatant'

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U.S. authorities announced yesterday that they had broken up a terrorist plot to detonate a radioactive "**dirty bomb**" in the United States, saying they had arrested a U.S.-born al Qaeda associate who was allegedly scouting targets after learning how to build such a device in Pakistan and Afghanistan.

Abdullah al Muhajir, 31, a former street gang member born in Brooklyn as Jose Padilla, was transferred late Sunday to a naval brig in South Carolina after President Bush designated him an "enemy combatant," according to Attorney General John D. Ashcroft and other U.S. officials.

Al Muhajir had been under surveillance overseas by the CIA and FBI, and was arrested May 8 at O'Hare International Airport in Chicago after arriving on a flight from Pakistan, U.S. officials said. His sudden move to military jurisdiction came less than two days before he was scheduled to appear at a secret hearing in front of a civilian judge, officials said.

An associate involved in the alleged plot had been apprehended by Pakistani authorities along with al Muhajir. The Pakistanis released al Muhajir to allow U.S. investigators to track him on his way to the United States, sources said.

Bush administration officials characterized the case as the most specific plot disrupted by the U.S. government since Sept. 11, when al Qaeda hijackers crashed jetliners into the World Trade Center, the Pentagon and a Pennsylvania field, killing more than 3,000 people.

Al Muhajir is the third person with a claim of U.S. citizenship detained in connection with alleged terrorist activities. John Walker Lindh is charged with conspiring to kill Americans abroad, and Yaser Esam Hamdi, who was born in Louisiana, is being detained in Norfolk as an enemy combatant.

Al Muhajir's alleged plot marks the only terror plan targeted at the United States to come to light since the December arrest of British national Richard C. Reid. He was restrained by passengers on a transatlantic flight after he allegedly

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attempted to light explosives contained in his shoes.

Still, many senior U.S. officials took pains yesterday to describe the plan as rudimentary and unformed.

"There was not an actual plan," Deputy Defense Secretary Paul D. Wolfowitz said at a news conference yesterday. "We stopped this man in the initial planning stages."

Wolfowitz said that al Muhajir "indicated some knowledge of the Washington, D.C., area," but Wolfowitz and other officials played down early reports that the District was the intended terrorist target.

A spokesman for Mayor Anthony A. Williams (D) said the city received no evidence from a federal joint terrorism task force that al Muhajir was a threat.

Ashcroft, in a Moscow news conference held during a visit to Russia, said al Muhajir's arrest "disrupted an unfolding terrorist plot to attack the United States by exploding a radioactive **dirty bomb**."

"We know from multiple, independent and corroborating sources that Abdullah al Muhajir was closely associated with al Qaeda and that, as an al Qaeda operative, he was involved in planning future terrorist attacks on innocent American civilians in the United States," Ashcroft said.

Administration officials have come under considerable criticism in recent weeks for mishandling clues to the Sept. 11 attacks. They stressed yesterday that foiling the alleged plot involved substantial cooperation between the FBI, the CIA and other agencies.

A "**dirty bomb**" is a device that would combine conventional explosives with radioactive material. Although such devices may do limited damage if detonated, they could cause widespread panic, eventual cancers and other health problems, and a cleanup nightmare for authorities, experts said.

Al Muhajir, who had spent several years overseas, had direct contact with al Qaeda lieutenant Abu Zubaida in 2001, and traveled to the Pakistani cities of Lahore and Karachi for research and debriefings on the plan, officials said. Zubaida, who is in U.S. custody overseas, provided the initial hints that led to the alleged plot, sources said.

Sources said al Muhajir had been held since May 8 under the same material witness statute that has been employed frequently since the Sept. 11 terror attacks. It recently has come under attack in federal court.

A Justice Department official said that al Muhajir can be held indefinitely as an enemy soldier under U.S. law, but that there are no plans to attempt to try him before a military tribunal. Such proceedings are not designed for U.S. citizens.

A former Latin Kings gang member in Chicago, al Muhajir served time in juvenile hall in connection with a gang killing and other incidents in Chicago. During a later stay in a Florida prison as an adult, he converted to a militant form of Islam, law enforcement sources said. Officials said he is married to a Middle Eastern woman, identified by one law enforcement source as an Egyptian.

Ashcroft and other administration officials alleged that while he was in Pakistan, al Muhajir researched radiological weapons and methods for wiring explosives. On several occasions in 2001 he met with senior al Qaeda leaders, they said.

In possession of a valid, and therefore valuable, U.S. passport, al Muhajir was sent back to the United States to conduct reconnaissance for the eventual detonation of a **dirty bomb**, officials said.

The disclosure of al Muhajir's arrest came after several weeks of warnings from Bush administration officials about possible attacks by followers of Osama bin Laden, including May 21 testimony from Defense Secretary Donald H. Rumsfeld that terrorists will "inevitably" obtain weapons of mass destruction.

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"We have a man detained who is a threat to the country and . . . thanks to the vigilance of our intelligence-gathering and law enforcement, he is now off the street, where he should be," Bush said yesterday during a photo session in Washington with visiting Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon.

Wolfowitz, at a Washington news conference with Deputy Attorney General Larry Thompson and FBI Director Robert S. Mueller III, said that "our number one priority is to defend the American people from future attacks. To do that, we must root out those who are planning such attacks. We must find them and we must stop them, and when we have them in our control, we must be able to question them about plans for future attacks."

By transferring al Muhajir to the Naval Consolidated Brig in Charleston, S.C., investigators can continue seeking information from him with relatively little interference from a defense attorney, several officials said.

Zubaida, who has emerged as one of the United States's most important sources of information about possible al Qaeda plots, told interrogators about the alleged **dirty bomb** plan in general terms and did not name individuals, sources said. Al Muhajir and his associate were not considered part of Zubaida's inner circle, officials said.

"He described this guy only generically, probably in a way he didn't expect would lead us to him," one senior official said. "But based on other information we had developed, we were able to track him down."

The CIA provided the principal information that led law enforcement to al Muhajir, sources said. The information included other interrogations and captured documents, but did not involve electronic intercepts or foreign intelligence services, two sources said.

In Pakistan, authorities recently arrested al Muhajir and one other associate, government sources said. Al Muhajir, who was detained for Pakistani immigration violations, was released and tricked into boarding a plane for the United States, where CIA and FBI operatives were watching his movements, several sources said.

"We were fully aware of his movements from the time he left Pakistan," one Justice Department official said. Another official said: "We had eyes on him the entire time."

Al Muhajir made one stop of undisclosed duration in Switzerland before arriving in Chicago on May 8, officials said. "This guy thought he was getting away," one U.S. official said. "He thought he escaped."

Had al Muhajir been kept in custody in Pakistan, the process of extraditing him would have complicated the investigation significantly, one official suggested. By trailing him, investigators could watch for other associates. Officials declined to say yesterday whether anyone met al Muhajir at O'Hare.

At the airport, al Muhajir was first escorted to an examination area used by the U.S. Customs Service, which discovered \$ 10,526 in undeclared currency, Customs officials said. Al Muhajir was interviewed, arrested and turned over to the FBI, officials said.

Al Muhajir was flown to New York under a material witness warrant and incarcerated at the Metropolitan Correctional Center in southern Manhattan, officials said. Prosecutors planned to have al Muhajir testify before a New York grand jury investigating terrorism.

But al Muhajir refused to cooperate, federal officials said.

Prosecutors scrambled to build a case against al Muhajir. Two foreign witnesses, in addition to Zubaida, had provided independent intelligence to U.S. officials about al Muhajir, but it was unclear whether that evidence would be admissible in a criminal proceeding, sources said.

After concluding that building a case would be difficult, prosecutors believed they were running out of time. They faced a secret hearing Tuesday before a judge, officials said, and turned in recent days to another option: transferring

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him to military custody.

On Sunday, prosecutors dropped the material witness warrant and withdrew a subpoena ordering al Muhajir to testify before the grand jury. After Bush signed a directive naming him as an enemy combatant, U.S. marshals escorted al Muhajir out of jail and turned him over to the military.

Staff writers Steve Fainaru, Barton Gellman and Colum Lynch in New York; Spencer S. Hsu and Bill Miller, research editor Margot Williams and researcher Lynn Davis in Washington contributed to this report.

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