

Nation

Bin Laden, cohorts are top suspects

By Jerry Seper and Bill Gertz
THE WASHINGTON TIMES

A sensitive U.S. intelligence report is pointing to Saudi extremist Osama bin Laden and his associates as the terrorists behind the deadly suicide aircraft attacks on the World Trade Center and Pentagon yesterday.

High-ranking U.S. intelligence officials said a communications intercept picked up after the nearly simultaneous attacks in Arlington and New York revealed that bin Laden associates had stated that two targets were hit.

Sen. Orrin G. Hatch of Utah, ranking Republican on the Senate Judiciary Committee, first disclosed in a CNN interview that an intercept revealed the bin Laden group claimed to have "hit two targets."

The international terrorism network known as al Qaeda, headed by the fugitive bin Laden, a Saudi expatriate millionaire, is the leading suspect in the devastating air strikes — acts of violence federal authorities said were precisely coordinated and well-financed.

Earlier, a knowledgeable U.S. government official said: "There are indications that people with links to Osama bin Laden and his organization, al Qaeda, may have been responsible." The official said, "we can't rule out others at this point."

There was no advance warning, the official said, adding that more attacks could be on the way. "We can't rule it out, but there are no immediate indications," the official said.

Bin Laden is already sought for his role in the 1998 simultaneous bombings of the U.S. embassies in Nairobi, Kenya, and Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, that killed 224 persons, including a dozen Americans, and injured 5,000 others.

An avowed enemy of the United States, he also is believed responsi-

ble for the 1996 car bombing in Saudi Arabia that killed 19 Air Force enlisted troops and the bombing last year of the USS Cole in Yemen, which killed 17 U.S. sailors.

Authorities said the deadly attacks yesterday were so well-coordinated that the hijacked planes used to crash into the World Trade Center and the Pentagon were picked specifically because they were all bound for the West Coast — meaning they were fully loaded with fuel.

"Maximum fuel," said one federal official. "They turned those planes into bombs and wanted the biggest bang they could get. They certainly knew what they were doing."

Law-enforcement authorities and others said the timing of the nearly simultaneous air crashes in New York and near Washington probably means that the terrorists involved used their own pilots — who steered the doomed aircraft with 266 passengers on board into the intended targets — for the planned strikes.

"No pilot, even with a gun to his head, is going to fly into the World [Trade Center] towers," said Gene Poteat, president of the Association of Former Intelligence Officers. "They [the terrorists] flew the planes themselves."

Authorities also are investigating whether al Qaeda terrorists were able to penetrate the ranks of airport security in Boston and Newark, N.J., and at Washington Dulles International Airport — the points of origin for the four hijacked planes, three of which hit their marks in yesterday's attacks — allowing others of their ranks to board the planes.

"There are only a few answers to the question of how these guys slipped through airport security at so many different locations," said one official.

The FBI has begun a massive investigation, establishing a command center deep in the bureau's Washington headquarters. Field agents have begun what could be the first of tens of thousands of interviews, and have set up crime scenes around the World Trade Center and the Pentagon to begin the arduous task of looking for evidence.

ISLAMIC TERROR

Leading Muslim terrorist groups

Islamic Jihad — The first Palestinian fundamentalist organization publicly committed to armed struggle against Israel was founded with Iranian backing in 1980.

Hamas — The Palestinian group was founded at the beginning of the first Palestinian uprising against Israel in the late 1980s.

Lebanon's Islamic Jihad — Founded in 1983, (distinct from the Palestinian movement of the same name), it claimed responsibility for attacks against the U.S. Embassy and its headquarters in Beirut, as well as several high-profile kidnappings.

Hezbollah — Set up in 1984 in Lebanon by Iran, it has never claimed responsibility for attacks outside Lebanon.

Osama bin Laden — The exiled Saudi-born multimillionaire who operates a global network of Islamic terror groups has been accused by the United States of masterminding the 1998 bomb attacks against the U.S. embassies in Nairobi, Kenya, and Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, that claimed 224 lives. He also is suspected of organizing a bomb attack on the destroyer USS Cole in the port of Aden in Yemen, which left 17 U.S. sailors dead last October.

The Washington Times

The FBI inquiry has focused on the crash sites, but also on the three airports from which the airplanes used in the attacks were hijacked. A number of airport employees are being investigated, federal officials said, along with rosters of international pilots. FBI agents overseas also have begun to check with informants and others and have begun to run down additional information on al Qaeda and other terrorist organizations.

Attorney General John Ashcroft called the attacks "one of the greatest tragedies ever witnessed on our soil," and promised that the Justice Department would "expend every effort and devote all the necessary resources to bring the people responsible for these acts, these crimes, to justice."

Intelligence officials said bin Laden has the money and the network to carry out yesterday's attacks, particularly following his alliance with Ayman Zawahiri, leader of an Egyptian terrorist organization known as Jihad. Zawahiri has signed on as al Qaeda's second-in-command.

"Al-Zawahiri has assumed control of al Qaeda's finances, operations, plans and resources, and was the second signer of a 'fatwa,' or declaration of holy war, issued by bin Laden in 1998 calling for the

death of all Americans and their allies, military and civilian," said one federal official.

"Al Qaeda may be one of the few terrorist groups capable of putting together and financing the kind of operation we saw in New York and Washington," said the official.

CIA Director George J. Tenet testified before Congress in February that bin Laden was an "immediate and serious" terrorist threat and was capable of carrying out multiple attacks with little or no warning.

Bin Laden, through a spokesman, yesterday denied any involvement. The Taliban, which controls most of Afghanistan where bin Laden is in hiding, also denied any involvement by its longtime guest.

Bin Laden issued his latest call for attacks against the "infidel West" in May in a videotaped message recorded at his son's wedding. Three weeks ago, he issued another warning, telling a London-based Arabic magazine of a pending "unprecedented attack, a very big one" against U.S. interests.

The FBI is the leading national security agency inside the United States that is responsible for countering terrorism. The CIA has the same job overseas. Both agencies have been hamstrung in their work in recent years because of guidelines that prohibit agents from

recruiting others who have records of human rights abuses or violent pasts. The restrictions have made the task of planting agents inside terrorist groups even more difficult.

John L. Martin, former chief of internal security at the Justice Department, said the attacks were "well-calculated" and designed to inflict maximum casualties. He said federal authorities had "no hint of it," describing it as "a complete lapse of security and intelligence."

But Mr. Martin said it is very difficult to stop "people who are willing to give up their lives" in carrying out such attacks. He called the attacks reminiscent of the Japanese raid on Pearl Harbor, both of which he described as "acts of war."

The attacks yesterday, however, did not come as a complete surprise. The State Department on Friday issued a worldwide alert warning that information gathered over the past several months indicated that U.S. citizens have been targeted by "extremist groups with links to Osama bin Laden's Al-Qaeda organization."

Larry Johnson, a former State Department deputy director for counterterrorism, said the coordinated attacks had the hallmarks of a bin Laden operation.

"It's bin Laden. It's bin Laden with the support of other groups," Mr. Johnson said in an interview, noting that the attacks demonstrated similar planning like bombings of embassies in Africa and the attack on the USS Cole. He said the attacks also appeared to be linked to recent Middle East violence.

Yesterday's attack on the World Trade Center is not the first time the landmark buildings have been the target of international terrorists.

But a 1993 plan to bomb the World Trade Center, devised by international terrorist Ramzi Yousef and financed by bin Laden, had a much loftier goal than just six fatalities; it envisioned toppling one of New York City's tallest tower onto its twin, amid a cloud of cyanide gas.

Authorities believe yesterday's attack was an extension and refinement of that plan — an elaborate scheme aimed at embarrassing America and killing as many of its citizens as possible.

Day of infamy

Turn to pages A8 through A18 for more coverage of yesterday's terrorist attacks.

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- Military officers call for a swift, tough response. **A10**
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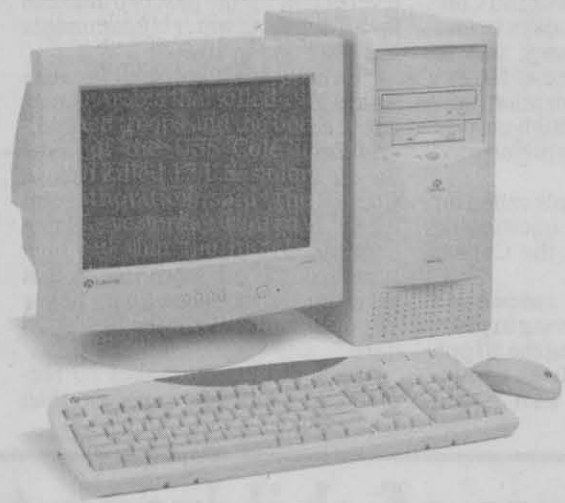
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