

Taliban denying fugitive involved

SUSPECT'S AFGHAN HOSTS CONDEMN ACTS IN STATEMENT

By Barry Bearak
New York Times

KABUL, Afghanistan — In a series of statements Tuesday night, this nation's Taliban rulers, hosts to fugitive Osama bin Laden, condemned the attacks on America and said bin Laden was not involved.

The Taliban's supreme leader, Mullah Muhammad Omar, issued a denial through a spokesman in Kandahar, Abdul Hai Mutmain: "Mullah Omar condemns this act. Mullah Omar says Osama is not responsible. We have brought peace to this country, and we want peace in all countries."

Explosions resounded north of the Afghan capital near its airport early today. The United States quickly denied any involvement in the explosions.

A U.S. official, speaking on condition of anonymity, said the explosions in Kabul appeared to be rocket attacks by opposition rebels in response to the attack on rebel general Ahmed Shah Massoud on Sunday. The insurgents blamed the attempt on the ruling Taliban, a hard-line Islamic group.

An opposition spokesman denied the rebels were responsible for the violence, and a Taliban spokesman blamed the explosions on a fire at an ammunition depot.

The explosions began around 2:30 a.m. and came in rapid succession, seconds apart, making buildings shudder. There were no sounds of airplanes or anti-aircraft fire.

Rockets also reportedly landed in the northern suburb of Khair Khana, hitting the Taliban depot. Giant plumes of black smoke billowed skyward. A Taliban military division is nearby.

From the Taliban's headquarters in southern Kandahar, Mutmain blamed the explosions on a fire at the ammunition depot. He did not say how the depot caught fire and denied that there was an attack on the capital.

The Taliban have consistently refused to surrender bin Laden, a Saudi dissident who enjoys the friendship of Mullah Omar as well as the sanctuary of a nation that deems hospitality a sacred duty.

Rather than expel their multimillionaire ally, who once fought alongside the Afghan mujahedeen against Soviet invaders, the Taliban have purported to cramp his style, insisting he indulge in neither political nor military activities while on Afghan soil.

But American intelligence officials believe that bin Laden's ties with the Taliban are increasingly close and that his freedom of movement may have increased in recent months. A recent videotape of bin Laden in Afghanistan showed him and his followers engaging in combat training, including firing heavy weapons and storming buildings.

Conflicting reports persisted Tuesday over whether Massoud, the leader of the northern-based opposition to Taliban rule, survived a suicide bombing attack Sunday.

The bombing in northern Afghanistan killed Massoud's aide as well as the bombers, two men posing as television journalists. The Russian news agency ITAR-Tass reported that Massoud had also died.

An opposition spokesman and Massoud's brother in London have said Massoud was gravely injured in the attack but was not killed.

Mercury News Wire Services contributed to this report.



"We happened to know just today that we have information that indicates representatives that are affiliated with Osama bin Laden were actually saying over the airwaves, private airwaves, that they had hit two targets."

— SEN. ORRIN HATCH

Signs point to bin Laden as architect of assault

GOVERNMENT SOURCES SAY KORAN, FLIGHT MATERIALS WERE IN BAG LEFT BEHIND

By Dan Eggen and Vernon Loeb
Washington Post

WASHINGTON — The U.S. government has strong evidence from multiple sources that the suicidal terrorists who carried out Tuesday's catastrophic attacks in New York and Washington are connected to Saudi fugitive Osama bin Laden, who has previously been linked to an earlier bombing of the World Trade Center, senior officials said Tuesday.

One senior official said the probability that bin Laden is behind the deadly assaults is in "the high 90s," while another U.S. official said investigators gathered evidence Tuesday "strongly suggesting" that bin Laden's organization, Al-Qaida, was involved.

After a briefing at the FBI, Sen. Orrin Hatch, R-Utah, said bin Laden associates had been overheard by American intelligence discussing an attack.

"We happened to know just today that we have information that indicates representatives that are affiliated with Osama bin Laden were actually saying over the airwaves, private airwaves, that they had hit two targets," Hatch told reporters.

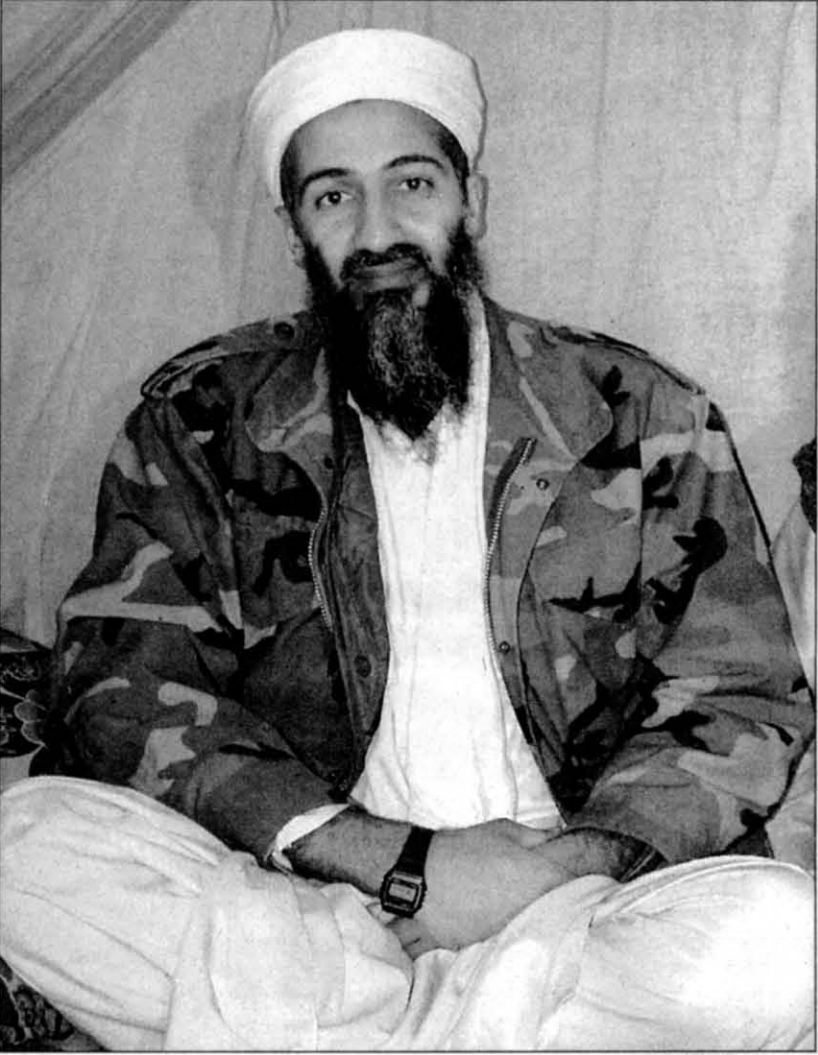
But one intelligence official said the information was not as clear as Hatch had suggested. "It is not definitive, but there certainly are a lot of indicators pointing at bin Laden," the official said, referring to the Saudi exile living in Afghanistan whom authorities have long identified as the chief architect of anti-American terrorism.

Officials found a copy of the Koran, an instructional videotape on how to fly commercial airliners, and a fuel-consumption calculator in a pair of bags that did not make it onto the doomed American Airlines Flight 11 that left Boston at 7:59 a.m. Tuesday and crashed into one of the World Trade Center towers an hour later. That led many investigators to suspect that the most likely terrorists were Islamist militants.

The bags belonged to a man with an Arabic name who investigators believe was one of the hijackers. He got on Flight 11 after flying into Boston from Portland, Maine, but his bags missed the connection.

Authorities were focusing some of their efforts on possible bin Laden supporters in Florida, based on the identification of a suspected hijacker on one of the manifests of the four jets that crashed, law enforcement officials said.

The FBI was preparing to search locations in Broward County in south Florida and the Daytona Beach area in central Florida, Florida Department of Law Enforcement official Rick Morera said.



ASSOCIATED PRESS ARCHIVES

Osama bin Laden, shown in an undated photograph, has long been sought by the United States. He has been living under the protection of Afghan forces.

The locations had links to the suspected bin Laden supporter on the jet manifest, officials said.

The evidence pointing to bin Laden was gathered after Tuesday's attacks in a joint effort by the CIA and the FBI, with information from both domestic and overseas sources, a senior official said.

One former U.S. intelligence official said Tuesday that after the plane crashes, enough people "on the margins of the bin Laden organization" were sending messages "saying 'We did it,'" to indicate strongly that bin Laden's organization was behind the coordinated attacks.

Unprecedented in scope and sophistication, the coordinated assault on the world's financial and political capitals caught the United States completely off guard — despite a massive intelligence and law enforcement network devoted to detecting and thwarting such attacks. Focused largely on guarding against bombing threats to overseas targets, U.S. authorities concede they were ill-prepared for hijacked jetliners purposely crashed on American soil.

A growing number of officials said

the magnitude of Tuesday's attacks put them beyond the reach of law enforcement. They said arrest and trial of conspirators was an inadequate response to what amounted to an assault on the nation's security that could only be dealt with by military force.

President Bush, addressing the nation last night, said the United States would make "no distinction" between terrorists and countries who harbor them in its hunt for those responsible in the attacks.

Bay Area federal law enforcement officials will today begin to contribute to the effort to determine who is responsible for the plane hijackings and deadly crashes.

Andrew Black, an FBI official in San Francisco, said the region's 30-member anti-terrorism squad would play a key role in pursuing leads on the West Coast. And agents in Washington and elsewhere will be shifted from other duties to the investigation, FBI officials said.

Journalists with access to bin Laden said he and his followers openly boasted in recent months that they were preparing for attacks against the United States in retaliation for American support of Israel.

Osama bin Laden

U.S. officials say Osama bin Laden, a renegade Saudi millionaire, is a major sponsor of terrorism.

1980 Joined Afghan resistance against former Soviet Union

1992 Claimed responsibility for attempted bombing of U.S. servicemen in Yemen

1993 Suspected of financing N.Y. World Trade Center bombing; thought to have supplied weapons that struck U.S. helicopters during Operation Restore Hope in Somalia

1995 Suspected of involvement in bombings in Riyadh and Dhahran, Saudi Arabia

1998 Implicated in bombings of U.S. embassies in Kenya and Tanzania

BACKGROUND

■ Saudi citizenship revoked in 1994

■ Thought to have at least 3,000 soldiers who have fought in Somalia, Eritrea, Chechnya, Afghanistan, Bosnia, Tajikistan, Yemen

Sources: State Department, news reports
KNIGHT RIDDER

"Personally, we received information that he planned very, very big attacks against American interests," said Abdel-Bari Atwan, editor of the Al-Quds al-Arabi newspaper in London. He was referring to conversations about three weeks ago. "We received several warnings like this. We did not take it so seriously, preferring to see what would happen before reporting it."

Bin Laden, 44, an militant from a wealthy Saudi Arabian family, has been defying U.S. efforts to capture or kill him for years. Since 1996, he has been living under protection of the Taliban militia in Afghanistan in a remote mountain redoubt. The Taliban rules Afghanistan under a harsh interpretation of Islam.

He has previously been linked to terrorists who attempted to destroy the World Trade Center in 1993. He has also been indicted in the deadly 1998 bombings of the U.S. embassies in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, and Nairobi, Kenya, and was linked to last October's attack on the USS Cole in Aden, Yemen, which killed 17 American sailors.

In Kabul, the Taliban's foreign minister swiftly condemned Tuesday's attacks and rejected suggestions that bin Laden could be behind them.

Mercury News wire services and Mercury News reporter Howard Mintz contributed to this report.



MERCURY NEWS

BIN LADEN AND FOLLOWERS LINKED TO OTHER ATTACKS

Osama bin Laden previously has been linked to terrorists who attempted to destroy the World Trade Center in 1993. He also has been indicted in the deadly 1998 bombings of the U.S. embassies in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, and Nairobi, Kenya, and was linked to last October's attack on the USS Cole in Aden, Yemen, which killed 17 American servicemen.

U.S. EMBASSY ATTACKS

These four followers of bin Laden were convicted in May of charges in the nearly simultaneous 1998 bombings of two U.S. embassies in Africa that killed 224 people



Wadhi el-Hage



Khalfan Khamis Mohamed



Mohammed Sadiq Odeh



Mohammed Rashed Daoud al-Owhali

COMMENTARY

Terror attack plunges U.S. into an uncertain struggle

CRISIS GIVES BUSH A CHANCE TO PROVE SELF AS COMMANDER IN CHIEF

By R.W. Apple Jr.
New York Times

WASHINGTON — Tuesday's devastating and astonishingly well-coordinated attacks on the World Trade Center towers in New York and on the Pentagon outside Washington plunged the United States into a warlike struggle against an enemy that will be hard to identify with certainty and hard to punish with precision.

The whole nation — and to a degree, the whole world — shook as hijacked airliners plunged into buildings that symbolize the financial and military might of the United States.

The security and self-confidence

that Americans take as their birthright suffered a grievous blow, from which recovery will be slow. The aftershocks will be nearly as bad, as thousands of people discover that friends or relatives died awful, fiery deaths.

Scenes of chaos and destruction, with smoke and debris blotting out the sun, were carried by television into homes and workplaces across the nation.

As Washington struggled to regain equilibrium, with warplanes and heavily armed helicopters crossing overhead, past and present national security officials debated the possibility of a congressional declaration of war — but against precisely whom, and in what exact circumstances?

Warships were dispatched into

New York Harbor. The North American Air Defense Command, which had seemed to many a relic of the Cold War, adopted a posture of

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heightened alert and suddenly seemed relevant.

Disappointing some of his political advisers and allies, who felt he should have returned to Washington at once from a trip to Florida to symbolize that the government was functioning, President Bush headed instead to Offutt Air Force Base near Omaha, Neb., where a more se-

cure command post was available.

The president flew back to Washington on Tuesday night, escorted by F-15 and F-16 fighters, as leaders of both parties closed ranks behind him with pledges of support and a stirring rendition of "God Bless America." In a brief, earnest televised speech, he said the day had taken "thousands of lives" and generated "a quiet, unyielding anger" in the nation. He promised that those who harbored terrorists would be treated as harshly as the terrorists themselves.

For Bush, the attacks constituted a threat and an opportunity. A minority president, just a few months into his term, derided by many as intellectually inadequate for his job,

he is likely to be judged on whether he can take command and act decisively.

Will he prove to be a Jimmy Carter, whose presidency was poisoned by his inability to resolve the Iranian hostage crisis? Or will he enhance his reputation, as Ronald Reagan did after the explosion of the space shuttle Challenger and as Bill Clinton did after the Oklahoma City bombing?

Samuel Popkin, a political scientist at the University of California-San Diego, who worked in the presidential campaign of Al Gore, said: "Many Americans have come to consider politics irrelevant in recent years. Now politicians matter again, and the president, in his role as commander in chief, becomes our focal point."