

SOPHISTICATED PLOT 'SUGGESTS AL QAIDA LINK'

Bath Chronicle, 11 August 2006

The terror plot uncovered by police yesterday demonstrates an escalation in terrorists' efforts to destroy lives, a Bath expert has said.

The scale, organisation and technology involved in the alleged plot are beyond anything seen before in this country, said Stefan Wolff, a renowned author on the subject and professor of political science in the Department of European Studies at the University of Bath. He said: "As details emerge from the security services, it appears the level of sophistication used by the would-be terrorists acting against the UK has tremendously increased.

"First there was the shoe-bomber, who basically stuck explosives to his shoes, then the 7/7 attacks and now the capability to use liquid explosives, which can be anything from baby milk to a shampoo bottle.

"This comes as a wake-up call that it is possible for people in the UK to get the ingredients and make the explosives themselves, or even the possibility that it has come into the country already made.

"We are facing a new level of technological sophistication. This is an escalation.

"They have gone to the air from the London commuter system. But that does not mean that there are groups and sleeper cells still thinking about attacking the local transport system."

Transport systems are targeted by terrorists because the devastation caused by the initial attack is compounded by the disruption to travel services, said Prof Wolff.

"We do not know exactly when the alleged terrorist attacks were planned to take place," he added.

"But if it happened now, during the summer holidays, there would have been massive destruction and loss of innocent life with lots of children travelling.

"Today shows two things. First is that there are still quite a number of terrorist cells active in the UK. Second is that the relative calm we have had since July 7 last year has lulled people into a false sense of security. "Fortunately the security services were able to uncover the plot."

Prof Paul Wilkinson, of the Centre for the Study of Terrorism and Political Violence at St Andrews University, said nothing on this apparent scale had succeeded before.

"This is really a very ambitious plot indeed. It is the kind of spectacular, potentially lethal attack which the al Qaida network has been particularly interested in carrying out," he said.

"I would be very surprised if it was found that they were not involved as a movement. It is possible I suppose that some other movement could have copied the kind of techniques that had been used by the al Qaida network but I don't think we should in any way underestimate it.

"It's a significant and serious development and the authorities are right to be responding with exceptional measures."

The alleged plot to blow up passenger jets in mid-air was in advanced stages of planning and was "suggestive of an al Qaida plot", US Homeland Security Secretary Michael Chertoff has said.

Mr Chertoff told a press conference in Washington DC that the plan had been to detonate liquid explosives on board "multiple commercial aircraft".

"This operation is in some respects suggestive of an al Qaida plot," Mr Chertoff said. "But because the investigation is still under way we cannot yet form a definitive conclusion."

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