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MI5 FOIL 'DIRTY BOMB' PLOT

Thursday February 3, 2011

John Twomey

POLICE and MI5 foiled an Al Qaeda-inspired "dirty bomb" attack in Britain, it emerged yesterday.

A gang of terrorists were planning to unleash the first radioactive blast on a major shopping centre.

They hoped to kill and contaminate scores of innocent civilians and leave a wide area inaccessible for years.

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The bomb would have included the highly toxic chemical osmium tetroxide which blinds, damages the respiratory system and turns the skin black.

After prolonged exposure, it can lead to an agonising, asthma-like death known as "dry-land drowning".

But the plot was foiled in 2004 following months of surveillance by MI5 and Scotland Yard's Counter Terrorism Command. Police believe the gang had been planning to detonate the "dirty bomb" at a major shopping centre in the South-east.

It is thought the terrorists did not managed to get any material into Britain and the plot was foiled "before it could get off the ground".

But experts say extremists are still keen to launch a "chemical, biological, radiological or nuclear" attack on a major Western city.

One said: "It's a question of when, not if, they will attempt such an attack. So far, they have been thwarted."

Professor Hans Michels, an explosives expert at Imperial College London, said: "Dirty bombs are definitely possible. If you want to bring radioactive material on a plane, the chances of it being detected are great.

"But radioactive bombs in cars and buses are a very different matter. They could use it in cities where there are large areas of people.

"Apart from the damage from the actual bomb, the radioactive material would spread out and rescue services would not immediately be able to reach the victims.

"This is a dangerous problem. The materials to make these types of bombs would most likely be stolen or supplied by rogue nations.

"The materials to make [the chemical] nitrocellulose are, unfortunately, readily available. You would have to order the chemicals but a trained chemist or someone with experience would be able to make them."

The warnings came as it was revealed that three Qatari men linked to the 9/11 terror attacks used a bolthole in London.

The suspects, still thought to be at large, visited the World Trade Center in New York and other potential targets including the Statue of Liberty.

The day before the atrocities, the three flew back to London where they are said to have gloated over the coverage of the attacks on television.

Later, they returned to Qatar, according to diplomatic cables obtained by the WikiLeaks website. One cable says the men were booked on an American Airlines flight from Los Angeles to Washington on September 10, 2001.

But they failed to board. The next day, the same Boeing 757 plane was hijacked by five terrorists and crashed into the Pentagon.

The three flew to England on September 10, before returning to Qatar.

A subsequent FBI investigation revealed their plane tickets were paid for, and their LA hotel reservation was made, by a convicted terrorist.

The WikiLeaks documents also reveal that US intelligence believes terrorists have planned to smuggle bombs on to planes inside teddy bears. Airport staff are being told to examine "children's articles".

According to the files, terrorists are trying to manufacture nitrocellulose, which becomes highly explosive if tightly packed and cannot be detected by X-ray machines.

Details on preparing it have allegedly been found in training manuals linked to Osama Bin Laden's Al Qaeda terrorists.