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Submitted by asiaadmin2 on Wed, 09/19/2012 - 11:02

Paper no. 580 09. 01. 2003

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The discovery of unmentioned quantities (or only traces?) of ricin, a potentially lethal poison extracted from castor seeds, during a raid on a flat in Wood Green, North London, by the British security agencies on January 5, 2003, and the arrest of at least nine North Africans, six of them stated to be Algerians, in this connection have their positive as well as negative aspects.

2. The most important positive aspect is that it speaks highly of the alertness and preventive capability of the British intelligence and security agencies dealing with counter-terrorism. It has been stated that the discovery and the arrests were made following a tip-off. However, it is not clear whether the tip-off came from a human agent or from an electronic intercept. In the intelligence jargon, one generally talks of a tip-off only when the preventive intelligence came from a human agent. However, this need not exclude the possibility of an initial alert having come through technical means.

3. Of the various nationals associated with Osama bin Laden's Al Qaeda in his International Islamic Front (IIF), the Yemenis are rated high for their communications security and the Algerians rather low. One may recall how in the 1990s, the British and the French intelligence agencies managed to neutralise an Algerian terrorist network, then not connected with bin Laden, by exploiting their weak communications security. If the first six arrested are really Algerians as stated initially, there is a strong possibility that this weakness of theirs had played a role in helping the British agencies.

4. If human agents too had played a role, it would show that despite the anti-Western feeling amongst some sections of the Muslims of the

UK, the British agencies have been able to raise human moles either in the terrorist networks themselves or in circles close to them. One would probably never know how and from where the tip-off came, but the British public and the international community as a whole have reasons to be re-assured by the alertness, robust capability and silent efficiency of their intelligence and security agencies.

5. As regards ricin itself, it is more a weapon of mass panic than mass destruction. It is till now looked upon as an individual and not a mass killer's weapon, unless the terrorists, in their destructive genius, have found ways of using it for mass-killing. Even successful use of the poison by the terrorists against select individuals in key positions could cause mass panic and economic dislocation. The British are, therefore, quite justified in treating the discovery with the utmost seriousness.

6. The most negative aspect of the incident is that despite the set-backs suffered by the terrorist elements in recent months due to the killing or capture of many of their trained cadres, the public inaction of bin Laden and his inability to lead from the front and co-ordinate, reportedly due to the effect of a sharpnel injury and the wide dispersal of the trained elements, their motivation remains undiluted and their determination to cause death and mayhem remains as strong as ever. The innumerable terrorist modules, drawing inspiration from bin Laden, which are now operating over a wide geographic area in the East as well as the West, continue to be as destructively innovative as ever and the incapacity or the death of bin Laden, if he turns out to be dead and gone, is unlikely to have any moderating impact on their killer-urge in the near future. Freedom from the fear of pan-Islamic jihadi terrorism is not for tomorrow.

7. Reports emanating from Afghanistan and Pakistan indicate that the attention of the bin Laden-inspired terrorist elements all over the world is now focused on retaliating against the West in general and the USA, the UK and Israel in particular, for any military action that they might undertake against Saddam Hussein in Iraq. Such retaliatory action is likely to include not only attacks on individuals or large groups similar to what one saw in Bali in October last year, but also on economic targets. Recent statements attributed to bin Laden or his Al Qaeda frequently refer to the economic aspect of their jihad against the so-called crusaders and the Jewish people.

8. The tightening of physical security, at the points of entry and exit, in the USA and other countries of the West has lessened the chances of infiltration of the pro-bin Laden dregs from Afghanistan and Pakistan into those countries. But, the physical security agencies of these countries have, unfortunately, not been equally effective in unearthing the sleeper agents of the various components of the IIF, who had already taken up position in their midst pre-9/11. These agents, many of them having been associated with bin Laden and his ilk in the past, would have the capability to keep the blood flowing and to damage the economy. The compulsory registration requirement now being imposed by the US Immigration on the residents in its territory from certain countries such as Afghanistan and Pakistan, is a welcome first step in their efforts to get a measure of these sleeper agents.

9. In the countries of Asia, despite tightened physical security at the points of entry and exit, it would be very difficult to prevent the return to their homelands of the dregs from Afghanistan and Pakistan. In the absence of prior intelligence about their previous terrorist background, the local security agencies may not be able to keep them under watch in order to prevent their indulging in acts of terrorism. Since such prior

intelligence is unlikely to be forthcoming, an option worth considering would be compulsory registration of all those returning home after a stay in Afghanistan and Pakistan.

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