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Edition 2GMDSUN 26 SEP 2004, Page 4

Blown apart; Dirty bomb horror: Our man Mazher smashes terror plot

MAZHER MAHMOOD & LUCY PANTON

Anti-terrorist cops move in after uncovers bid to buy radioactive material

THIS is the chilling moment anti-terrorist police swooped on a gang suspected of trying to buy radioactive material for a "dirty bomb" that could have slaughtered thousands of Britons.

Three men were arrested at a London hotel after a joint operation between the News of the World and Scotland Yard's elite

Anti-Terrorist Branch. A fourth was arrested later.

We infiltrated a sinister underworld network believed to be acting for Mr Big in Saudi Arabia—a known al-Qaeda hotbed.

The Saudi was willing to pay Pounds 300,000 for a kilo of "Red Mercury"—a deadly substance developed by Cold War Russian scientists for making briefcase nuclear bombs.

The blast from just one could kill everyone for several streets

around, causing unimaginable mayhem if exploded in a city.

Our man—posing as a Muslim extremist—was told by one of the gang:

"It (Red Mercury) is very, very radioactive. The guy (from Saudi Arabia) said it is used for making bombs. It'll either be for use here in the UK or the USA."

The News of the World was acting on a tip-off that a merchant banker was on the lookout for nuclear bomb-making material for a client in the Middle East.

We sent in our investigations editor Mazher Mahmood who, working undercover, convinced the gang he knew where to get hold of Red Mercury.

Nervous

He was taken to a series of meetings with members of the team hoping to supply the deadly material to the Saudi Mr Big, described as sympathetic to "the Muslim cause".

First he was introduced to the banker and one of his henchmen on a quiet Sunday afternoon at the Broadwalk shopping centre in Edgware, north London.

The banker—originally from Goa and who has spent several years in the Middle East—was nervous that anti-terrorist detectives might already have him under surveillance.

He insisted he would have walked away from the meet if our "fanatic" had drawn attention to himself in any way.

As he and his sidekick from Mozambique faced our man over drinks in a cafe, the banker said: "This has become so sensitive now with these terrorist attacks. I don't want to be seen with a guy with a long beard.

"Because you never know, now all of a sudden arrests are taking place, and especially when we are dealing with this thing..."

The second man then butted in, wanting to nail down their deadly business. He asked our man: "It is the real stuff, is it? What quantity do you have, a kilo?"

The banker—married with two young children—then spoke of the Red Mercury buyer for the first time. "It's a Middle Eastern chap in the Gulf. He'll pay Pounds 300,000 for a kilo." He said the buyer was part of "the Muslim cause".

He told our man the next step was to meet the gang leader—a Muslim Somali who would supply the Red Mercury to the Middle East Mr Big.

The banker continued: "He wants it here. He knows what it is. He said it's used for making bombs and it's radioactive, so be very careful!"

By now our man realised the plot was escalating and we immediately called in Scotland Yard.

Our meeting with the Somali took place on September 9—two days before the third anniversary of the World Trade Center attacks—at lunchtime at London's Liverpool Street station.

Unknown to the gang we were now working directly in conjunction with officers of SO13, the Yard's crack anti-terrorist experts.

The 6ft 4in Somali was wearing a traditional African cap. Together with the banker and his sidekick, he led our man to a nearby Starbucks cafe to discuss business.

The Somali revealed his links with Saudi Arabia. He said he had lived there for seven years.

Then he got straight down to business. "How many grams do you have in hand?" he asked our man. "I will test it first." The banker's sidekick chipped in: "He wants to test it before the man comes (from Saudi Arabia)."

There was a brief discussion about how dangerous it would be. The Somali then went on: "If it is there, what we are giving you will be cash. British pounds."

Armed

Our man asked: "Once you are happy that this is radioactive material then what's the next process?"

The Somali replied: "We can go ahead at that time!"

He said as soon as he was satisfied that the material was radioactive he would arrange for his Saudi contact to fly over.

"He's already applied for his visa. He will get it Saturday morning and can come from that time any minute," he explained. Another meeting was held last Monday not far from Paddington Green police station before a final rendezvous with the Somali and his gang was arranged on Friday at the Holiday Inn at Brent Cross.

They were accompanied by another member of the gang we had not seen before.

But Scotland Yard were ready and waiting for for them.

Teams of surveillance officers and armed marksmen surrounded the high-rise hotel.

As the Somali and his henchmen left the meeting, officers from the Yard's elite SO13 Anti-Terrorist Branch pounced.

A convoy of arresting officers parked in the nearby Toys R Us car park were waiting for the call that the suspects were in view.

At 2.45pm exactly the call came over the mobile phone to "Strike, Strike, Strike".

With a screech of tyres, officers from SO19—the Yard's firearms branch—were first in. Three vans blocked all the possible escape routes—the doors flew open and police burst onto the scene.

Before the stunned gang knew what had hit them they were pinned to the car park tarmac at gunpoint.

Last night the men were being held at London's top-security Paddington Green police station on suspicion of the commission,

preparation and instigation of terrorism. They can be held for 14 days before charges have to be made.
Officers were yesterday carrying out forensic searches of the gang members' homes.
A source said: "Officers are now intensely questioning the suspects to get to the bottom of the plot."
Additional reporting: NEIL McLEOD
* DO you know of a scandal that Maz should expose? You can call him anytime on 020 7782 4402 or email maz@notw.co.uk

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