

SNIFFING OUT TROUBLE

Suspicious about a new terrorist attack have U.S. spies scrambling

BY CHITRA RAGAVAN
AND MARK MAZZETTI

The chatter was persistent—and alarming. In the weeks after the deadly March bombings of four commuter trains in Madrid by al Qaeda operatives, the supersecret U.S. surveillance network, Echelon, intercepted a number of messages from suspected terrorists suggesting planning for a massive,

multipronged assault on the United States. When? Between this summer's political conventions and October, one month before the presidential election. The intelligence appeared to confirm information obtained from some seized al Qaeda computers and from several human sources, government officials say. Officials at the CIA and the National Security Agency, which runs the Echelon program, believe the information is cred-

ible but worry that the human sources were on the periphery of the now widely dispersed al Qaeda network. Nevertheless, the information pointed to two, perhaps three, targets, the sources say: New York, Washington, and Las Vegas. The objective of the suspected attack, the officials continued, would be not only to cause mass casualties and devastation of U.S. infrastructure but to roil the presidential race. The Madrid bombings,



which killed 191 people and wounded 1,800, also toppled the Spanish government and triggered the withdrawal of Spanish troops from Iraq. "Since Spain," says a Bush administration official, "al Qaeda has had the feeling of 'We can do this. We can affect an election.'"

Washington is scrambling to react. Last month, *U.S. News* has learned, the CIA began a massive effort to pull operatives from around the world and redeploy them to Afghanistan and Pakistan, where al Qaeda's base of operations is still believed to be. "We think that's where the best effort can be made," says a U.S. counterterrorism official. "The CIA declined to comment, but intelligence sources say the agency is spending hundreds of thousands of dollars to re-

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cruit more Arabic and Pashto speakers; agency officials hope they will be able to corroborate signals traffic and intelligence from human sources with information from the al Qaeda computers and databases. "They want hard data," says an intelligence source familiar with the CIA's recruiting efforts, "and that's tough as hell to get."

U.S. special operations forces are also being deployed in greater numbers to the region, but just to Afghanistan. The CIA has long been able to operate in Pakistan's lawless tribal lands near the Afghan border, but U.S. troops are not supposed to be used as spies. Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf, the target of two recent assassination attempts because of his support of the U.S. war on terrorism, has barred American troops from stepping on Pakistani soil, even though he has only cursory authority over the sprawling mountainous tribal lands where Osama bin Laden is thought to be hiding. "It's *its own* goddamn country, and we can't send our people in there!" says a senior military official, speaking about the tribal areas. "But where's the next best place we can do business? Afghanistan."

"Hammer and anvil." The heightened efforts along the Afghanistan-Pakistan border began last winter. In operations Mountain Resolve and Mountain Storm, conventional and special operations forces conducted sweep operations from spartan "fire" bases near remote villages along the border in order to develop better intelligence networks, in hopes of picking up leads on bin Laden's movements. But the heralded "hammer and anvil" strategy—with Pakistan pushing terrorists out of safe havens in the tribal lands and U.S. forces grabbing them in Afghanistan—has achieved only modest success because Musharraf hasn't followed through on pledges to carry out sustained military operations in the borderlands.

For CIA operatives and special operations troops, the hunt for bin Laden has now all but been supplanted by the urgent assignment to try to thwart a new terrorist attack in the United States. Navy SEAL units are shuttling through the Middle East and Central Asia on three-month rotations, administration sources tell *U.S. News*, instead of the usual six months, in order to make more commandos available to take part in the mission.

It is, in some respects, a catch-as-catch-can operation. "They're not even close" to having enough CIA personnel in Afghanistan to get the job done, a government official says, and agency re-

cruiters are concerned that they are hiring new assets in the region so quickly that background checks may fail to detect problems or even potential double agents, who might deliberately send the agency astray with false information.

Given the nature of the suspected threat, however, officials say, they're just going to have to live with such uncertainties. Analysts say the intelligence chatter about an attack on the United States has shown up in open Internet forums and is similar to message traffic that preceded the Madrid bombings. "It's not just the official [terrorist] websites but also the chat rooms and Web forums," says Gabriel Weimann, a scholar in residence at the U.S. Institute for Peace. "The picture is not looking very

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good." Messages posted before the attacks in Madrid, Weimann says, described the Spanish government as "the first domino." Last week, the FBI sent out an advisory to law enforcement to be on the lookout for suicide bombers. Homeland Security Secretary Tom Ridge also issued guidelines to Amtrak and other passenger train services to beef up security, including using bomb-sniffing dogs and removing trash cans from key locations. In a stunning move, the organizers of the Democratic convention, to be held in July in Boston, said they would shut down the area's busiest highway during the morning and evening rush hours for the entire four days of the event. It is still unclear whether the train stations at FleetCenter in Boston and under Madison Square Garden in New York City, where the Republican convention will be held, will be allowed to remain open.

The convention sites aren't the only possible terrorist targets. The summit of leaders from the Group of Eight industrialized nations is scheduled to be held in Sea Island, Ga., in June, and the Summer Olympic Games begin in Greece in August. "That's a group of lucrative, attractive targets," says a senior FBI official. "We have what's generic—at best—intelligence, and we're attempting to react to it without knowing quite what it might be." ●