



US Feared Attack on Obama Inauguration By Somali Extremists From Canada

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OTTAWA -- As the clock ticked down to the inauguration of Barack Obama, the RCMP was investigating urgent, high-level U.S. fears that Somali extremists from Canada were poised for a spectacular attack on the historic ceremony, the Ottawa Citizen has learned.

In the days and hours leading up to the Jan. 20, 2009 inaugural on the steps of the Capitol building, the monumental threat unfolded in Washington and at the National Security Criminal Investigations unit at RCMP Headquarters in Ottawa.

About three days earlier, an informant walked into an overseas U.S. embassy and claimed that Canadian disciples of al-Shabab, the al-Qaida-inspired Somali militant group, had crossed the northern border and intended to detonate high explosives at the event, a source close to the investigation confirmed to the Citizen. Al-Shabab is an outlawed terrorist organization in the United States, but not in Canada.

A major FBI terrorism probe, soon involving much of the country's national security and intelligence analysis apparatus, deemed the tip to be increasingly credible, according to The New York Times.

The information was taken so seriously, the incoming administration made contingency plans in the event Obama was assassinated, the Times reports.

"All the data points suggested there was a real threat evolving quickly that had an overseas component," Juan Carlos Zarate, former president George W. Bush's deputy national security adviser for combating terrorism, told Times White House correspondent Peter Baker.

The threat seemed to weigh on Mr. Obama, too, writes Baker: "He cancelled a practice session to go over his inaugural address with aides at Blair House. David Axelrod, his senior adviser, later interpreted that as a sign that Mr. Obama was thinking about the suspected plot.

"He seemed more subdued than he had been," said Mr. Axelrod.

"Obama had not yet taken office, and he was already being confronted with the threat that consumed his predecessor's presidency," continues Mr. Baker. "No matter how much he thought about terrorism as a senator or as a presidential candidate, it was another thing to face it as the person responsible for the nation's security -- and quite another thing again to know the threat was aimed directly at himself, his wife and their two daughters."

"It's not as if you don't know what you're getting into," Mr. Baker quotes Mr. Axelrod as saying. "But when the reality comes and the baton is being passed and you're now dealing with real terrorism threats, it's a very sobering moment."

The RCMP found nothing in their databases as they probed the backgrounds of suspects in Canada identified by the FBI. On the inauguration eve, an FBI/U.S. Homeland Security security bulletin to state and local law enforcement identified al-Shabab as the possible threat.

By mid-morning on Inauguration Day, as Mr. Bush hosted the traditional pre-inauguration coffee in the White House Blue Room for the president-elect and Michelle Obama, national security teams for both administrations met for three hours in the Situation Room in the West Wing.

Martha Joynt Kumar, a professor of political science at Maryland's Towson University, goes on to describe the crisis session in the current edition of the journal Presidential Studies Quarterly, which quietly broke the story in December as part of a broader study of the Bush-Obama transition of power.

Officials at the session included incoming national security adviser Stephen Hadley, incoming Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton, Condoleezza Rice, Defence Secretary Robert Gates, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Admiral Mike Mullen, Central Intelligence Agency Director Mike Hayden, Director of National Intelligence Mike McConnell and FBI Director Robert Mueller.

Ms. Kumar quotes one participant:

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"Senator Clinton really showed ... the sense of both a politician and also [was] able to see things from the president's perspective. And she asked the best question of the meeting, which was, 'So what should Barack Obama do if he's in the middle of his inaugural address, and a bomb goes off way in the back of the crowd somewhere on the mall? What does he do? Is the Secret Service going to whisk him off the stage, so the American people see their incoming president disappear in the middle of the inaugural address?'"

"I don't think so."

The group decided Mr. Gates, the only Obama cabinet secretary to have been confirmed by the Senate [he served in Bush's administration] and the logical person in the line of succession for the presidency, would be kept in a secret location away from the ceremony, according to Mr. Baker.

In Ottawa, the RCMP soon concluded there was the tip was a hoax. "There was nothing to it," says the source who spoke to the Citizen on the condition of anonymity.

"This was all a hoax ... a poison pen," operation, in which individuals or groups attempt to frame or expose a rivals to authorities, said the source, noting it successfully played on fears among some Americans that Canada is a safe haven for terrorists.

In a major October speech in October, RCMP Commissioner William Elliott said Islamic radicalization of Canada's Somali community is becoming a national security concern.

Canada hosts one of the largest Somali communities in the western world and Somali-Canadians are at risk of being radicalized and recruited to fight with Islamist al-Shabab (the youth) extremist movement in Somalia's civil war, he warned.

"The potential follow-on threat, from a Canadian and RCMP perspective, is Somali-Canadians who travel to Somalia to fight and then return, imbued with both extremist ideology and the skills necessary to translated it into direct action."

As many as six young ethnic Somali men vanished from Toronto late last year, worrying the RCMP and Canadian Security Intelligence Service because of a pattern of similar behaviour in the United States.

In Minneapolis, at least 20 Somali-Americans have gone missing only to turn up in Somalia as members of al-Shabab.

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