

10-14-2004

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### Recommended Citation

LADB Staff. "Strange Saga of Terrorism Disproved." (2004). <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/noticen/9243>

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## Strange Saga of Terrorism Disproved

by LADB Staff

Category/Department: Central America

Published: 2004-10-14

Two top Central American vote-grabbing issues fused in late September to create a potential blockbuster. Al-Qaeda infiltration of the region and the proliferation of youth gangs (see NotiCen, 2004-08-19) were brought together in a Washington Times article claiming that Adnan el Shukrijumah, "a key al-Qaeda cell leader for whom the US government has offered a US\$5 million award," had been in Honduras in July, meeting with leaders of El Salvador's Mara Salvatrucha gang.

The paper said el Shukrijumah had made his way to Honduras from Panama, crossing borders illegally. He wanted to arrange a partnership with the gang because it was said to control alien-smuggling routes through Mexico to the US. US Attorney General John Ashcroft had identified el Shukrijumah as "a clear and present danger" to his country, citing "credible intelligence from multiple sources" for the accusation. Salvatrucha, in turn, was identified as "the gang of greatest interest" by US Attorney Paul J. McNulty. Smuggling terrorist operatives into the US aside, the article also said that al-Qaeda also planned attacks on US, British, Spanish, and El Salvadoran embassies in Tegucigalpa. The story circulated widely in the region's media.

Central America had already stepped up coordinated efforts to foil al-Qaeda plots on the isthmus. Nicaraguan military authorities had said in August that military intelligence had been working in close collaboration ever since threats against El Salvador appeared on the Internet following that country's decision to send a new batch of soldiers to Iraq (see NotiCen, 2004-08-04).

Nicaragua's army chief Gen. Javier Carrion said then that regional port and airport facilities had been reinforced, and other secret plans to prevent infiltration by Islamic extremists had also been put into operation. But somehow, el Shukrijumah had slipped into Tegucigalpa.

In El Salvador, three days after the Washington Times story appeared, Policia Nacional Civil (PNC) director Ricardo Menesses said there had been no confirmation of the terrorist sighting, even though the Times story attributed it to "law-enforcement authorities," without identifying them either by name or organization. Menesses said, "We talked with the Honduran authorities, intelligence, military, and police, and they didn't confirm it. When the rumor circulated, I spoke with them because I was in Costa Rica at a meeting of police chiefs of the region." Carrion doubted the veracity of the story, attributing the fever pitch of the rumor to a US\$5 million reward the US has offered for the capture of el Shukrijumah.

### *Secret meetings, another rumor*

Meanwhile, a parallel story began to make its way through the media, the denial of which then became rumor fodder. On Sept. 30, the Salvadoran government issued a denial that the Central American presidents had met secretly in El Salvador to discuss the presence of al-Qaeda in their

lands. Salvadoran presidential press secretary Julio sent out a press release denying a La Prensa (Nicaragua) report that President Enrique Bolanos had attended a secret meeting in El Salvador for this purpose.

Rank quoted La Prensa as having said the meeting was about the presence of the "terrorist group al-Qaeda in Central America to contact members of gangs." Rank's press release said that Salvadoran President Antonio Saca had a tight schedule during the dates in question, and it "at no time has included that supposed 'secret meeting' of presidents to which the Nicaraguan communication makes reference." Saca was busy during that time with the visit of the Dalai Lama and with the national budget scheduled for presentation to the legislature. Rank also noted that Menesses had called the Washington Times article "false."

Next to be heard from in the developing gang-terror amalgamation story was Honduran Defense Minister Federico Breve Travieso. On Oct. 7 he spoke to the country on radio from Washington, DC, denying the link. Breve was in the US lobbying for an increase in the annual US\$800,000 anti-narcotics contribution. He had reportedly been talking with US Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld about terrorism and drugs. He told his listeners, "It has not been confirmed by our intelligence groups that members of the al-Qaeda group have a relationship with juvenile gangs that operate in this Central American country." He included not only Salvatrucha but also others whose turf extends to the poorest neighborhoods of Tegucigalpa, San Pedro Sula, El Progreso, and Choluteca.

### *Money if not for terror, then for drugs*

But Breve was not about to abandon a different link to the gangs and, parenthetically, to a different source of US largesse. "We have succeeded in confirming that the gangs are being utilized by international narco-trafficking bands to distribute drugs in this country," he told his co-nationals. Breve's nonconfirmation was corroborated by a report from Cancun, Mexico, where Saul Hernandez, chief of Interpol's Central America subregional office, called the terrorist-gang linkage mere speculation. He said Interpol had discovered no evidence of the contact or even that el Shukrijumah or any al-Qaeda personnel were in the region. "We have no information that confirms that effectively this person [el Shukrijumah] was there...in every verification that was done, it has not been confirmed," he said. El Shukrijumah is on Interpol's fugitive list. Hernandez is also a PNC commissioner. He was in Cancun attending the 73rd general assembly of Interpol.

In Guatemala, the government, while acknowledging the lack of corroboration, has moved forward with the possibility of gang links to terrorism and, as late as Oct. 5, was still considering that what was not, could have been. Vice President Eduardo Stein said that the recent reactivation of a presidential commission against terrorism, allowed to lapse during the administration of former President Alfonso Portillo (2000-2004), was justified because "we have received intelligence information in the sense that there could be contacts being made between terrorist organizations like al-Qaeda and maras [juvenile gangs]."

Stein said the information was the Honduras story, but admitted, "In reality, we have no more than those indications and have no verified and proven information that in Guatemala this kind of contact is being made." He added that, according to his intelligence information, "this possible

contact is being made in the jails of California," where Central American gang members are serving sentences for crimes in the US.

While in agreement with Guatemalan President Oscar Berger's reactivation of the commission, Stein said of the original Portillo commission, "We have the impression that it was more a response to external demands," and it "did not function really as a work unit that would permit advancement of the analysis of...the subject of terrorism. Today, we are convinced that we need to address the issue for internal security." Portillo started the commission after Sept. 11, 2001.

The day after Stein's remarks, back at the Interpol meeting in Cancun, Michael Garcia, assistant secretary of US Homeland Security, bridged the apparent contradiction between the unverified claim of al-Qaeda operatives in the region and the need to watch out for them anyway. "I personally don't know of an al-Qaeda known terrorist trying to come through Mexico into the United States. What I do know is that obviously there are smuggling organizations very active along the border, and they present a risk," Garcia said. "If a terrorist shows up, has enough money, finds the right organization, he could get across the border. That's a risk."

### *Coming full circle*

A remaining question in the chronology of the gang-Qaeda rumor concerns where The Washington Times got the story. The strongest possibility is that it originated with Honduran Security Minister Oscar Alvarez, who was not even mentioned in the Times report. On July 1, 2004, Reuters reported being told by Alvarez, "We can prove the presence of terrorists from the Middle East in our country. Many people don't believe, or don't want to believe, in their determination to preserve Honduras as an island, isolated from the global world." He then said that el Shukrijumah had been seen in an Internet cafe in Tegucigalpa after arriving from Panama, where the putative terrorist was allegedly attempting to plant explosives to blow up the canal.

Other allegations fit the Washington Times story. The Reuters story, published in *Diario de Hoy* in El Salvador, also contained a denial from PNC chief Menesses. "Honduras has not sent us any information about this supposed terrorist," he said. "If it happens, we are ready to start investigations." In his later comments, after the Times story appeared, Menesses did not mention his statement in July, and the rumor went round again.

-- End --