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Sellafield terror attack warning

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Ben Summerskill
Sunday December 16, 2001
[The Observer](#)

Ministers have been warned that a determined terrorist attempt to fly an aeroplane into the Sellafield nuclear reprocessing plant could not be prevented because of its proximity to transatlantic flight paths.

The warning, from MI5, came after Tornado fighters were scrambled over the plant in response to a reported hijack attempt last month.

'The position at Sellafield is unthinkable,' an intelligence source confirmed. 'If it were hit successfully, everything within 150 miles could go. The position has now been made clear to Ministers.'

'Sellafield is two minutes from the transatlantic flight path. Even if you had a warning that a plane had been hijacked, you would have no real opportunity to intercept a plane flying at 400 or 500 miles an hour. By the time you listened to a call reporting the hijack, it could be all over.'

Within days of receiving the advice two weeks ago, Home Secretary David Blunkett - piloting his new terrorism Bill through the Commons - complained: 'Those who tell me we are not [vulnerable] are the ones who do not have the security and intelligence information which, for my sins, I carry.'

More than 200 flights a day pass within 50 miles of Sellafield in Cumbria. They come not just from Heathrow, but from continental Europe. Two-mile exclusion zones are enforced around the plant, but these only apply to a height of 3,000 feet. Two miles would provide just 14 seconds warning of an approaching aircraft flying at 500 miles an hour.

A spokesman for BNFL, which owns Sellafield, said last night: 'Our buildings are robust and there are the strictest security arrangements. They are built to hold radioactive material.' But a company source conceded that the possibility of an aircraft being deliberately flown into the structures had not been considered when they were constructed.

David Learmount, safety editor of Flight International, said: 'You may have slightly more than two minutes, but it wouldn't be more than five. Thankfully, however, if you dive a civil airliner very quickly, it might lose control and miss the building.

'If however it appeared that a plane was intent upon hitting Sellafield, you would have to attempt to blow it out of the sky altogether with the passengers.'

Environmental groups have repeatedly complained about a perceived terrorist threat to Sellafield. Friends of the Earth have claimed that any accident could kill two million people.

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