

U.S.: Bin Laden has nuke know-how

President Bush announces a financial freeze on two international groups on Thursday.

Dec. 20 — Pakistani nuclear scientist Sultan Bashiruddin Mahmood may have shared more weapons expertise with Osama bin Laden than previously thought. NBC's Jim Miklaszewski reports.

NBC, MSNBC AND NEWS SERVICES

WASHINGTON, Dec. 20 — The Bush administration disclosed new details Thursday that suggest terrorist mastermind Osama bin Laden may know much more about building nuclear weapons than originally thought.

The White House says a Pakistani nuclear scientist met with bin Laden weeks before Sept. 11 and provided detailed information about how to make a nuclear weapon.

THE DISCLOSURE came in a Rose Garden ceremony marking the 100th day of the U.S. war on terrorism, when President Bush announced steps to freeze the assets of two groups accused of having links to terrorists.

One of the groups, known as Umnah Tameer E-nau (UTN), which can be translated as “Islamic Reconstruction,” allegedly provided bin Laden with more than just financial support.

“UTN claims to serve the hungry and needy of Afghanistan, but it was the UTN that provided information about nuclear weapons to al-Qaida,” Bush said.

The White House alleges in a fact sheet on Islamic Reconstruction that Sultan Bashiruddin Mahmood, a Pakistani nuclear scientist, met with bin Laden weeks before Sept. 11 and provided detailed information about how to make a nuclear weapon and the effects of a nuclear blast.

There is still no evidence, however, that bin Laden, in fact, has a nuclear weapon.

Mahmood is the author of several unconventional books that link religion and science, and in his latest he predicted the end of the world, or Armageddon, would be preceded by a massive explosion.

He left the Pakistan Atomic Energy Commission in a storm of controversy during the government of former Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif, who before Musharraf’s 1998 coup entertained signing Pakistan to the Nuclear Test Ban treaty.

U.S. officials told NBC News that a search of Islamic Reconstruction offices in Kabul, abandoned last month in the wake of American bombing, turned up large amounts of significant data on nuclear weapons, including computer hard drives

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In one meeting, a bin Laden associate reportedly claimed to have nuclear material and wanted to use it to make a nuclear or radiological bomb — a “dirty bomb,” also known as “the poor man’s nuke” — that could at least spread radioactive material over an area.

“It’s within the reach of many, many groups to fashion a dirty bomb,” said David Albright of the Institute for Science and International Security, a Washington, D.C.-based group that seeks to stop the spread of nuclear weapons.

Other documents recovered from Islamic Reconstruction in Kabul outlined a plot to kidnap an American attaché. U.S. officials believe that kidnap plan may still be active and won’t reveal the name of the target.

Islamic Reconstruction was started in March 2000. Friends of Mahmood describe him as “bored” after his essentially forced retirement from the PAEC. At the same time, his religious beliefs became more hardline, and he turned his attention toward “humanitarian projects” in Afghanistan. He started Islamic Reconstruction with about \$10,000 he received upon retirement, and sought similar donations from other retired colleagues and businessmen. His son told me that he traveled to Afghanistan twice in 2001. His family maintains that Mahmood was not a fanatic, and that all Islamic Reconstruction’s work was of a charitable nature.

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In Afghanistan and beyond, the search goes on for bin Laden. Intelligence reports indicate one of his sons has said that bin Laden is on the move, back and forth between Afghanistan and Pakistan.

As for Mahmood, the Pakistani scientist, he is under house arrest in Pakistan and reportedly cooperating with authorities.

TARGETING SUSPECT GROUPS

In his Washington, D.C., announcement, Bush targeted Islamic Reconstruction and a second group based in Kashmir.

“Today, I’m announcing two more strikes against the financing of terror,” Bush said.

The president said his administration is working with U.S. allies to freeze the financial assets of Islamic Reconstruction and the Kashmir group.

Neither group is believed to have assets in the United States, officials said.

Bush said the freeze order also affects three of Islamic Reconstruction’s directors.

“We’re issuing orders to block any of their assets within U.S. jurisdiction, and putting the world on notice that anyone who continues to do business with Islamic Reconstruction and its principal figures will not do business with the United States,” Bush said.

BUSH CITES KASHMIR GROUP

Bush identified the Kashmir-based group as Lashkar-i-Taiba, or LAT. He condemned the attack on India’s parliament last week, but did not draw a direct link to the terrorist group. India has blamed the attacks on forces operating within Pakistan.

“LAT is a stateless sponsor of terrorism, and it hopes to destroy relations between Pakistan and India and undermine Pakistani’s president, Musharraf,” Bush said. “To achieve its purpose, LAT has committed acts of terrorism inside both India and Pakistan. LAT is a terrorist organization that presents a global threat, and I look forward to working with

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the governments of both India and Pakistan in a common effort to shut it down, and to bring the killers to justice.”

Already, in the 100 days since suicide hijackers attacked on Sept. 11, the Bush administration has blocked more than \$33 million in assets of groups said to be involved in terrorism. Some of the 142 countries that are cooperating in the U.S. anti-terror campaign have frozen another \$33 million in assets.

The tallies are part of a 100-day report released by the White House on Thursday to show progress in the war at a time when frustrating questions swirl around bin Laden’s whereabouts and whether he will be captured at all.

White House: The Global War on Terrorism -- The First 100 Days

Since United States began bombing targets in Afghanistan on Oct. 7, the military has destroyed at least 11 terrorist training camps and 39 command posts of Afghanistan’s terrorist-allied Taliban, according to the White House report.

During that same period, the Defense Department’s \$51 million humanitarian mission airdropped nearly 2.5 million food packets to starving Afghan civilians.

On the diplomatic front, the report points to Afghan progress in forming a new interim government, led by Prime Minister Hamid Karzai.

MSNBC.com’s Preston Mendenhall, NBC’s Jim Miklaszewski and The Associated Press contributed to this report.

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