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National News

CHILLING NUKE-PLANT TERROR PLOT BARED

By BRIAN BLOMQUIST

February 1, 2002 -- WASHINGTON - An al Qaeda terror leader told U.S. interrogators of a horrifying plot to fly a commercial jetliner into an American nuclear reactor, a government memo reveals.

The Nuclear Regulatory Commission memo - obtained by The Post - says that an "al Qaeda senior operative" told interrogators that "there would be a second airline attack" that would have possibly more devastating results than the catastrophic attacks of Sept. 11.

"The attack was already planned and three individuals were on the ground in the states recruiting non-Arabs to take part in the attack," reads the chilling memo.

"The plan is to fly a commercial aircraft into a nuclear power plant to be chosen by the team on the ground."

If U.S. military jets try to interfere with the kamikaze nuclear strike, the terror pilots are to fly the plane into "any tall building," the memo said.

The al Qaeda operative told interrogators the attack was "already planned" and that "three individuals" were already in the United States and working with "non-Arabs to take part," said the memo, citing information from FBI headquarters.

The target was to be chosen by terror operatives already on the ground. "No specific timeline or location was given for the attack," it says.

The chilling disclosure came as Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld warned that the U.S. could be hit with an attack "vastly more deadly" than those of Sept. 11.

And it followed President Bush's revelation that U.S. officials in Afghanistan found blueprints of nuke facilities, water-treatment plants, city maps and information on landmarks.

An FBI official confirmed last night that the bureau provided the information to the NRC, saying the terror tip was first received "several months ago" - but after Sept. 11 - and determined to be "not a high threat."

"We put it to the test. It was not deemed to be a credible, hard threat," an FBI official said.

But a U.S. source said a foreign government provided the same terror tip a few weeks ago. That prompted the FBI to double-check the threat and, again, conclude it could not be verified.

Nonetheless, the NRC sent the warning memo to all 103 nuclear-power plants in the United States on Jan. 23.

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The plants weren't required to take any extra precautions.


They've been on high alert and under armed guard since Sept. 11 - but federal and nuclear industry officials say the tightened security hasn't been specifically aimed at a suicide airliner attack.


The NRC said 20 warnings have gone to nuclear facilities since Sept. 11.


Nobody knows for sure what would happen if terrorists aimed a jetliner at a nuclear plant.


Industry executives emphasize that nuclear reactors are protected by 2- to 5-foot-thick steel and concrete containment buildings, and have redundant safety systems.

NRC Chairman Richard Meserve said he could not describe with assurance the consequences if "a large airliner, fully loaded with fuel . . . crashed into a nuclear-power plant."

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