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Nuclear Threat in 1995 Went Unheeded

By THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

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U.S. officials received a warning as early as 1995 that Islamic militants were plotting to attack an American nuclear site, but did not pass along the information to the agency that oversees nuclear facilities or to the plants themselves, The Associated Press has learned.

The warning came in police interrogations of convicted terrorist Abdul Hakim Murad and from a computer seized in the Philippines from Ramzi Yousef, mastermind of the 1993 attack on the World Trade Center. Both men were linked to Osama bin Laden and his al-Qaida terrorist network, and are serving life in prison in the United States for plotting to blow up 12 U.S.-bound airliners.

The AP learned of the 1995 warning through secret intelligence documents and interviews with officials in the United States and the Philippines.

According to a secret Philippines report, a letter obtained from Yousef's computer indicated he was ``planning to attack any nuclear facilities in the U.S. and unspecified targets in France and Great Britain."

Yousef, who ran the al-Qaida cell that targeted the World Trade Center in 1993, discussed the plan with Murad when the two met in October 1994 in Quetta, Pakistan, according to statements Murad made to interrogators.

But Murad, who was arrested in Manila in January 1995, said he was unaware of the specifics of the plan to attack nuclear facilities.

Rodolfo Mendoza, a former police official in Manila who was among those who supervised Murad's interrogations, said the details on the nuclear threat were immediately shared with U.S. authorities.

``During a debriefing session, Murad told us about this planned attack on an unspecified nuclear facility. We passed on that information from Murad to them (U.S. officials)," Mendoza said.

Murad also told investigators that he and other Middle Eastern students took pilot training at U.S. flight schools in the early 1990s and that he had proposed a suicide mission in which he would fly a jetliner into a federal building.

That information, provided six years before the Sept. 11 attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, also was shared with FBI agents in Manila. An FBI agent who accompanied Murad back to the United States for trial, testified in 1996 that Murad spoke about plans for a nuclear attack.

Victor Dricks, spokesman for the Nuclear Regulatory Commission, said the government agency charged with overseeing the country's 104 nuclear facilities had not heard of such a warning during 1995.

``We did not know of any credible threat against any specific facility that we would take seriously enough to take some action on," he said.

Carl Crawford, manager of nuclear communications at Energy Nuclear, which operates nine reactors in the South and the Northeast, said that in 1995 the company ``never received any formal communications from the NRC or any other federal law enforcement agency regarding such threats. We never received any request to go on high alert."

In January, the NRC alerted nuclear power plants that the government had received a tip from an al-Qaida operative that terrorists might be planning a suicide attack on a power reactor.

An FBI official, speaking on condition of anonymity, said at the time that the NRC had acted on old information that had been deemed not credible. But the NRC communication said the agency decided to issue the alert after an FBI agent in Washington state contacted a nuclear power plant about the threat.

The NRC ordered the nation's nuclear plants operating in 31 states to their highest alert level after Sept. 11 and at least seven states are using National Guard troops to help secure reactors.

The Federal Aviation Administration banned private planes from flying within 11 miles of nuclear plants and the U.S. Coast Guard is patrolling the Great Lakes to keep ships away from plants on the coastline.

Some lakes with power plants on their shores have been closed to recreational activities altogether, although officials have said that at least portions of the lakes will be reopened soon.

Exelon Nuclear, which owns 10 plants, closed three Illinois cooling lakes after the attacks. A spokeswoman said the plants were reevaluating security, including how close boaters could get to the facilities.

In France, surface-to-air missiles were positioned near a major nuclear reprocessing plant and a military base for nuclear submarines six weeks after the Sept. 11 attacks. Radar systems capable of scouting out airplanes flying at low altitudes were stationed there as well.

Officials have declined to say what France was doing to protect its 20 nuclear power plants from terrorist attacks. France gets more than three-fourths of its power from nuclear energy.

Hungary also has placed surface-to-air rockets near the country's only nuclear power plant, about 60 miles south of the capital, Budapest.

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