

# Southern Africa seen as growing terrorism base

JOHANNESBURG, South Africa (AP) - One terror suspect sold Islamic CDs and DVDs at flea markets. Another worked at a hamburger joint, blending into a country whose porous borders, easy money-laundering and passports for sale have created a popular hideout for international fugitives.

The arrests of the two — a U.S. embassy bomber and a man accused of plotting to set up a militant training camp in the United States — have authorities investigating whether al-Qaida members are using southern Africa as a base to raise funds, recruit supporters and provide logistical support for global attacks.

Members of South Africa's security forces and some government leaders warn the region must step up anti-terror vigilance or it could become a target itself — much like Britain, accused of ignoring the danger of letting militants base themselves there prior to the July 7 mass-transit suicide bombings by homegrown Muslim radicals.

"There are groups in Africa that claim to be part of al-Qaida and other structures, and here in southern Africa they have been discovered seeking refuge and quite possibly attempting to set up networks," South Africa's Intelligence Minister Ronnie Kasrils said this week.

Kasrils, addressing a Navy symposium, said Africa's busy sea lanes and harbors were vulnerable with much of the world's oil and other cargo moving through the Red Sea, the Suez Canal, along the Mozambique Channel, around the Cape of Good Hope and through the Straits of Gibraltar. Other possible targets include U.S. and other embassies, international corporations, major hotels, shopping complexes and sports stadiums.

"It is not something that we would consider an imminent threat or danger, but we have to be vigilant," South African government spokesman Joel Netshitenzhe told The Associated Press. "No country would want to be seen as a base for terrorism."

While it's difficult to assess the extent to which Islamic radicals may have penetrated southern Africa, the region is attractive as a base and largely off the security radar as pressure mounts on al-Qaida and its associates in northern and eastern Africa.

Wanted Islamic militant foreigners like Aswat and Mohamed can easily blend into South Africa's significant Muslim minority - 2 percent of its 45 million people.

The country also has modern banks, good roads, airlines and telecommunications — all useful for planning attacks. And long stretches of unpatrolled borders and government corruption provide opportunities to

bypass immigration controls, launder money and illegally get materials.

Officials here have acknowledged that al-Qaida militants and their associates traveling through Europe have obtained South African passports, which allow travel to many African countries and Britain without visas. U.S. and Mozambique officials have also looked into whether al-Qaida is launder-

ing money through the Indian Ocean nation.

Southern Africa has syndicates dealing in everything from counterfeit goods and credit-card fraud to trafficking of guns, gems and narcotics — all potential revenue sources now that traditional avenues of terror funding are being shut down.

"Is there a formal structure of al-Qaida here? Probably not," said Kurt

Shillinger, who heads the South African Institute of International Affairs' terrorism project. "Are there elements of al-Qaida? Probably."

Shillinger said he would be surprised if such elements unleashed attacks here, however, given how useful South Africa can be as a support base.

In July, authorities in Zambia captured and deported to Britain Haroon

Rashid Aswat, accused of plotting to set up a camp in Bly, Oregon in 1999 to train militants to fight in Afghanistan. Investigators said the Briton of Indian descent also spent time in South Africa and made trips to Botswana and Mozambique before his arrest.

Aswat denies he is a terrorist, but Zambian investigators said he told them he (See Terror, Page 16)

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