
Would U.S. see another Christmas terror attack?

by Matthew Rusling

WASHINGTON, Dec. 24 (Xinhua) -- U.S. authorities are on high alert one year after a terror suspect supposedly tried to blow up a U.S.-bound jetliner by smuggling a bomb onboard in his underwear.

Christmas 2009 saw Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab, a Nigerian with alleged ties to al Qaida, unsuccessfully attempt to set off an explosive device while en route to Detroit.

Government agencies are taking precautions for militants trying to attack over the Christmas and New Year holidays. While there is no way of telling whether an attack is imminent, some experts say the holiday season presents advantages to militants.

"(Terrorists) are hoping to take advantage of an overstressed commercial aviation fleet and use that to their advantage," said Fred Burton, vice president of intelligence at global intelligence company Stratfor.

Operationally, the high volume of passengers traveling during the holidays makes it difficult for the authorities to spot a militant operative and foil a plot, Burton said.

Extremists are also big on symbolism, and for those who planned last year's attack, Christmas symbolizes its anniversary.

Fears of an attack also come amid recent warnings that extremists could try to poison salad bars in U.S. hotels and restaurants during this holiday season.

HOMEgrown MILITANTS

In an interview on ABC channel's "Good Morning America" news show on Tuesday, Attorney General Eric Holder expressed concern over the possibility of attacks against the United States by radicalized Americans. Near the top of his list of worries is U.S. citizen Anwar al-Awlaki, a radical cleric who is believed to be laying low in Yemen.

With terror networks under close scrutiny from the United States and its allies worldwide, organizations such as al Qaida are wary of conducting large-scale operations such as the 9/11 attacks. Extremist groups' funds have dwindled and training skilled operatives is a difficult endeavor under the watchful eye of the U.S. intelligence, experts say.

As a result, militant groups are now focused on recruiting Americans to conduct smaller-scale attacks, which might include, for example, targeting shoppers at a mall with a pistol. Such an operation is cheap, requires little skill or planning and has already been successfully pulled off.

Last year, a U.S. Army psychiatrist went on a shooting rampage at Fort Hood, Texas and killed 13 U.S. soldiers. The shooter, Nidal Malik Hasan, allegedly has ties to al Qaida's

Yemeni branch.

Another advantage is that U.S. citizens have no language or culture barriers and are familiar with local geography.

WHEN WALLS GO UP, TERRORISTS SEEK A WAY AROUND

U.S. transportation authorities have in recent months implemented a new pat-down procedure and, in some airports, set up video imaging equipment to scan underneath the clothes of passengers.

But critics say there is no evidence that the initiatives make passengers safer.

Security experts say al Qaeda and other terrorist networks are constantly trying to stay one step ahead of airport security measures. If the United States builds a wall, militants try to find a way around it.

Indeed, many security measures implemented since the 9/11 attacks -- from requiring passengers to remove shoes to restrictions on carrying liquids onboard -- in theory provide only temporary security.

That is because radicals are constantly seeking a loophole.

Body scanning technology, for example, cannot tell whether an explosive device is hidden in a body cavity, a fact that terrorists have used to their advantage.

Last year, radical operative Abdullah Asieri hid explosives and a detonator in his rectum in a bid to assassinate Prince Mohammed Bin Nayef, Saudi Arabia's counterterrorism chief. While the blast failed to kill the prince, it demonstrated the effectiveness of the method. Others question whether body imaging equipment is worth the high price, and some experts noted that out of millions of flights and billions of flyers in the United States over the last decade, not one terrorist bomb has successfully exploded at a U.S. airport.

Some experts, however, argue that the new procedures adopted by the Transportation Security Administration (TSA), while no silver bullet, complicate terrorists' attempts to wreak havoc.

GO FOR THE BOMB, NOT BOMBER

Critics contend that authorities are searching for the bomb instead of the bomber. While technology has its place, it cannot identify suspicious behavior, as only humans have the right instincts to understand when someone is behaving suspiciously.

Despite the brainwashing before a suicide bombing, most bombers are under extreme stress while attempting to carry an explosive device on board an aircraft, which would cause them to exhibit some strange behavior.

Based on that, some experts advocate the Israeli approach, which employs highly trained agents to look for suspicious activity among passengers, although opponents counter that

the method is impractical in the United States, given the high volume of daily air traffic.

On Wednesday, John Brennan, President Barack Obama's chief homeland security advisor, said U.S. security has improved since last year's attempted Christmas bombing.

"We are in a much better position today than we were last year at this time," he told reporters at the White House.

On Friday, Brennan convened an inter-agency coordination call with Homeland Security Secretary Janet Napolitano and other security chiefs, in which they reviewed the additional steps they said they are taking to ensure vigilance throughout the holiday season, including enhanced security measures and close coordination with foreign partners, according to the White House.

Some experts noted that terrorists sometimes win even when they do not conduct attacks, since their objective is to implant fear.

"To some extent terrorists win even when they fail," said Christopher A. Preble, director of foreign policy studies at the Cato Institute.

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