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NEWS

Thursday, September 13, 2001

Echelon Gave Authorities Warning Of Attacks

by Ned Stafford

U.S. and Israeli intelligence agencies received warning signals at least three months ago that Middle Eastern terrorists were planning to hijack commercial aircraft to use as weapons to attack important symbols of American and Israeli culture, according to a story in Germany's daily Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung (FAZ).

The FAZ, quoting unnamed German intelligence sources, said that the Echelon spy network was being used to collect information about the terrorist threats, and that U.K. intelligence services apparently also had advance warning. The FAZ, one of Germany's most respected dailies, said that even as far back as six months ago western and near-east press services were receiving information that such attacks were being planned.



Within the American intelligence community, the warnings were taken seriously and surveillance intensified, the FAZ said. However, there was disagreement on how such terrorist attacks could be prevented, the newspaper said.

Echelon is said to be a vast information collection system capable of monitoring all the electronic communications in the world. It is thought to be operated by the U.S., the U.K., Canada, Australia and New Zealand. No government agency has ever confirmed or denied its existence. However, an EU committee that investigated Echelon for more than a year just last week reported its belief that the system does exist.

The EU committee said that Echelon sucks up electronic transmissions "like a vacuum cleaner," using keyword search techniques to sift through enormous amounts of data.

The FAZ, in its news story, described the system as covering the whole world with 120 satellites. The newspaper also said Israeli intelligence had collected information indicated that Arab terrorist groups planned to hijack planes in Europe to use as weapons to attack targets in Tel Aviv and other coastal cities in Israel.

Because of increasing concerns of plane hijackings, Israel has tested a new x-ray machine at the Tel Aviv airport, the FAZ said. The machine capable of detecting all known explosive elements, even if only in small quantities, the newspaper said.

The FAZ said that German intelligence fears that in coming days planes will be hijacked in Europe and the Near East, and that there is no sure way to protect against it.

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