

Two Somali men are sentenced to prison

ALEXANDRIA, Va. (AP) — Two Somali men who ran a branch of a money transfer group linked to the al-Qaida terrorist network were sentenced to prison Wednesday for illegally structuring bank deposits.

Abdirahman Sheikh-Ali Isse, who ran the branch, was sentenced to 18 months. His nephew Abdillahi Abdi, who worked for Isse, was sentenced to 10 months, including five months of home detention.

Both remained free on bail pending appeals of their sentences.

The government acknowledged that neither man had knowledge that their parent organization, al-Barakat, was allegedly funneling money to terrorists.

Both men lived in Alexandria, where their business was located. It was one of several al-Barakat branches raided nationwide in November in an effort to choke off al-Qaida's financial network.

Defense attorneys had argued that their clients should have been eligible for probation because the violations were technical in nature and because they had no knowledge of the supposed link between al-Barakat and al-Qaida.

Assistant U.S. Attorney Gordon Kromberg had argued that the men should receive three to five years because their criminal record supported al-Qaida, albeit unwittingly.

Isse, 49, said it was unfair to punish him because of alleged actions of al-Barakat.

"I came to this country seven years because our country was destroyed," Isse said through an interpreter. "I did not come to harm people or to break the laws of the States."

Abdi, 35, said he cooperated fully with investigators and was punished for doing so.

"They told me they wanted to talk to me because they were trying to get the people responsible for Sept. 11," Abdi said. "I thought they were being honest. They used what I told them against me."

Abi-Barakat, an organization based in the United Arab Emirates that caters to Somalia, was the largest business in Somalia before the government froze its assets last year. Some people relied on al-Barakat to transfer money because the country has no central banking system.

Kevin Byrnes, who represented Isse, said there is no proof of the government's claim that al-Barakat supports al-Qaida.

Reports of strange activity on ground two airplanes

Texas (AP) — Reports of strange passenger behavior on two commercial jet flights sent the pilots back to the ground Wednesday but did not appear to be terrorist related, authorities said.

In Texas, American Airlines Flight 1702, with 50 passengers on board, returned to Bush Intercontinental in Houston after reports of a disturbance. A crew member saw a suspicious item that turned out not to be a weapon, said Gordon Johndroe, spokesman for the White House Office of Homeland Security.

"We do not believe there was any terrorist-related incident, but we continue to investigate," he said.

One passenger was removed and was being questioned by the FBI.

In Arkansas, Northwest Airlines Flight 979, with 94 passengers and a crew of five, was diverted to Fort Smith, Ark., because four men, who appeared to be of Middle Eastern descent, behaved strangely, authorities said.

The Transportation Security Agency initially said three of the men had locked themselves in a restroom together, with reports that they were shaving their bodies. A law enforcement source in Arkansas who only on condition of anonymity said it was believed they went to the restroom but drew attention because they were shaving their heads.

All four men were questioned by the FBI. After last year's attacks, documents from luggage of attack Mohamed Atta gave appeared to be instructions for the suicide hijackers: "On a previous night, shave the head from the body (and)..."

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