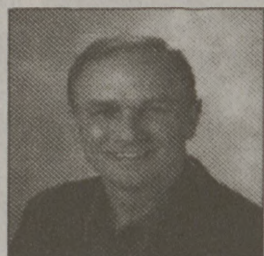


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Religious edicts, anti-American sentiment likely fueling bombings around the world

By Paul Alexander
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

MANILA, Philippines — Religious edicts from al-Qaida leaders and anger over the U.S. occupation of Iraq are more likely behind a rash of bombings around the world than direct orders from Osama bin Laden's organization, government officials and terrorism experts say.

And the string of blasts — from Madrid to Tashkent to Manila — may be fueling momentum for more attacks from like-minded terror groups, raising concerns for the U.S. handover in Iraq, the Athens Olympics and upcoming elections in Europe, Asia and the United States.

Officials said they likely averted major bombings with arrests and confiscations of TNT in Manila and 1,000 pounds of ammonium nitrate, a fertilizer compound frequently used as a bomb ingredient, in London.

There's no evidence of a worldwide terror organization or that al-Qaida is calling the shots, perhaps even setting off the wave of violence with key words or phrases in messages from the network's top leaders, officials and terrorism experts told The Associated Press.

"If only it were that simple," said Magnus Ranstorp, director for the Study of Terrorism and Political Violence at the University of St. Andrews in Scotland. "There is still a belief that all of these activities are coordinated by an omnipresence of al-Qaida from above, and that is simply not the case."

Al-Qaida is thought to be decentralized now with bin Laden and other leaders on the run since 2001. While it may be working on a big operation like another Sept. 11, "you have a second tier of local atomized cells working away on their own time scale and their own initiative, carrying out different activities," Ranstorp said. "Sometimes they are linked, but often they are not."

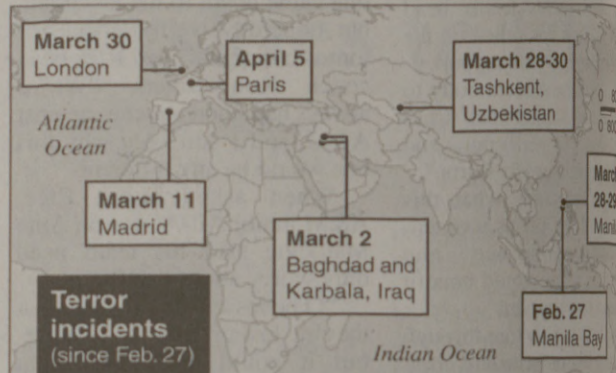
A U.S. counterterrorism official said that if there is a trigger, it's anti-American, anti-Western sentiments among militant Muslims.

In addition to the occupation of Iraq, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has fueled anger against Washington, which is seen as pro-Israel. And religious edicts, called fatwas, from bin Laden and other al-Qaida officials have encouraged attacks on Americans and their allies.

Four jailed Malaysians said Friday that attacks against churches and other targets in Southeast Asia — including bombings in Bali that killed 202 people in 2002 — were inspired by a fatwa issued by bin Laden.

Recent attacks tied to al-Qaida

Religious edicts from al-Qaida and anti-American sentiment in Iraq are more likely behind the rash of bombings worldwide than direct orders from Osama bin Laden's organization, officials say.



- Feb. 27: Manila Bay** Fire aboard the Superferry 14, kills more than 100 people; Abu Sayyaf claims responsibility.
- March 2: Baghdad and Karbala** Coordinated blasts strike Shiite Muslim shrines killing at least 181 people.
- March 11: Madrid** Train bombings kill 191, injure more than 800.
- March 28-29: Manila** Abu Sayyaf members arrested with 80 pounds of TNT that they allegedly planned to use on trains, malls and Western embassies.
- March 28-30: Tashkent, Uzbekistan** Suicide bombings and shootouts with police kill dozens.
- March 30: London** Police seize half a ton of ammonium nitrate, a bomb ingredient.
- April 5: Paris** Police nab 13 suspected militants in connection with the 2003 Morocco attack that killed 22.

The edict told Muslims to kill "Americans wherever they are, irrespective of whether they are armed or not, whether they are soldiers or civilians or women, elderly people or children," said Mohamed Nasir Abbas, one of four men interviewed by Malaysia's TV3.

Rodolfo Mendoza, a Philippine police intelligence official who has done extensive research on Asian Muslim extremist groups, said such fatwas have pitted Islamic extremists against the West.

"It means there is an ongoing war," Mendoza said. "If we say that there is a war on terrorism, they say there is a war on infidels."

Former Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad said the March 11 attacks that killed 191 people in Madrid illustrated how terrorists want to "hit back in some way" against Washington and its allies.

"The war in Iraq has worsened the terrorism problem," Mahathir told AP. "By attacking the Iraqis, you enlarge the front and add enemies to yourself."

All of the groups that have been blamed or have claimed responsibility for recent bombings have ties to al-Qaida, which has fostered and nurtured other terror groups since at least the late 1980s with money, training, ideological indoctrination and targets.

Some, like the brutal Abu Sayyaf in the Philippines, are like wind-up toys that can be turned loose to wreak havoc, experts say. Strategies and timetables may differ, but the

goal does not: Muslim domination of a region or the world.

"We're seeing a new level of fanaticism in the world," said Philippine National Security Adviser Roderic Gonzales. "You're seeing coming together of like-minded twisted minds."

The Madrid blasts have been seen as the start of a recent wave of attacks, but first may have happened weeks earlier, several intelligence sources say.

Philippine officials initially scoffed at the Abu Sayyaf claim of responsibility for the fire that killed more than 100 people on a ferry. But witnesses told a maritime board inquiry an explosion occurred where the Abu Sayyaf said planted explosives.

Then, President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo, a key supporter of the U.S. war on terrorism, announced last week the arrests of four Abu Sayyaf members with 80 pounds of TNT that allegedly was tagged for use against trains, malls and Western embassies.

One suspect claimed to have stashed eight pounds of explosives in a television set that he slipped past sniffer dogs and detonated on the ship, true, it would be the Philippines' worst terror attack.

A week later came a series of suicide bombings, mortar barrages and explosions that killed at least 181 people in Baghdad and the Shiite city of Karbala, targeting Shiites on a religious holiday. U.S. officials have blamed fighters from outside Iraq.

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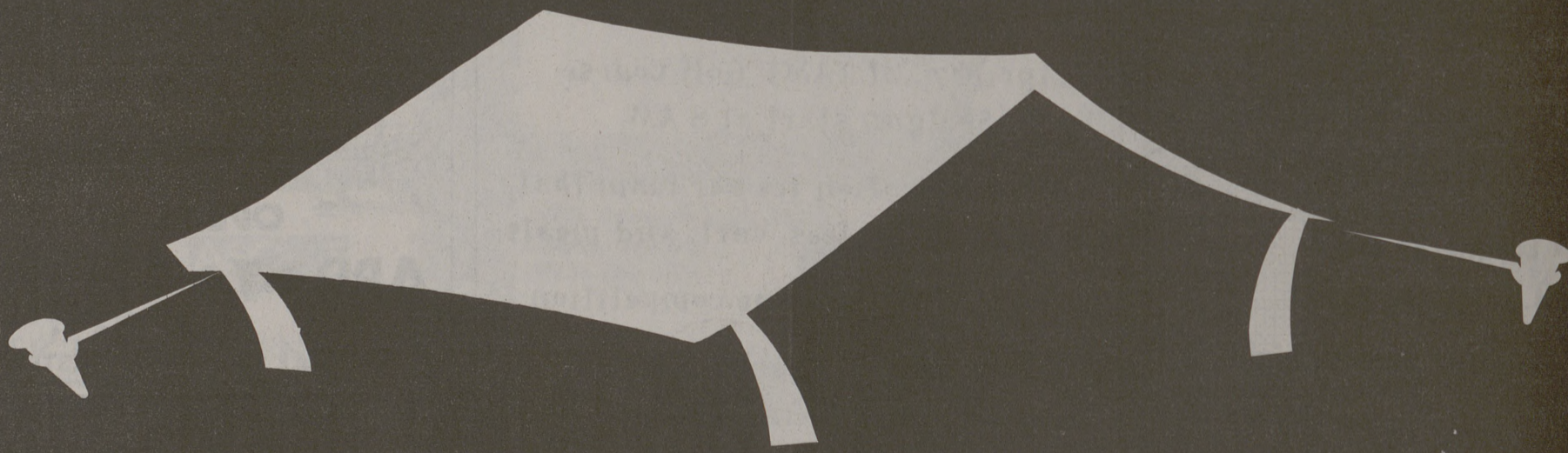
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