

Reshma Khilnani

STS.092

February 25, 2003

Terror Alert is a Well-Planned Distraction

On February 7th 2003 the current presidential administration decided to raise the terror alert level from yellow (“elevated”) to orange (“high”). The official reasons given were information from Al Qaeda operatives held at camp X-ray, confessions from Shadi Abdullah and Mounir el-Motassadeq, suspected Al Qaeda operatives arrested in Germany, and an increase in intercepted telephone conversations, email messages and other intelligence regarding a terror attack. The real reason for the change in terror alert, however, is the creation of a distraction from the problematic aspects of war with Iraq. This is clear because of the nature of the evidence presented by the administration, and the known history of the administration with regard to public education.

Though it is clear that the CIA has not divulged all information regarding the potential threat to the United States, what they have disclosed is highly suspect. In the New York Times on February 14th, 2003 (Threats and Responses, Risen), it was printed that the administration had received intelligence from wiretaps and emails that were specific enough to justify a heightened risk. The specific content itself, however, was not printed in that article, nor any Times article to date. The Times linked this information to the Osama bin Laden audio tape aired on Al Jazeera that same week calling for suicide attacks against American targets. Throughout the week, several specific references to planned attacks have been made in major newspapers namely the Times (Shenon, February 16th), the Wall Street Journal, and USA Today. These specific references, also provided from the CIA and the Pentagon, refer to planned attacks with dirty bombs, and biological weapons on American soil after the end of the Hajj (yearly Muslim pilgrimage to Mecca). However, this information is attributed to the detainees at Camp X-Ray who have been detained for almost a year and a half, and have been in custody for two Hajjes. Further specific information was provided, through the CIA, was a confession from two former al Qaeda operatives Shadi Abdullah and Mounir el-Motassadeq who have been in custody in Germany for almost a year as well. No other evidence has been provided in the New York Times or Wall Street Journal since the terror alert was elevated on the 7th. Because the major evidence that the administration releases is based on testimony from

individuals who have been in custody for so long, the pressing need for an elevated terror alert is highly suspect.

Another indication that the administration planted the elevated terror alert to help distract from the Iraq situation is their knowledge of the nature of public education. In the past, this administration has been praised for its coherent and well-planned public appearances in many areas, notably the 2002-midterm elections, and the military intervention in Afghanistan. It is clear that they have a firm grasp on the details of educating the public about their point of view. They know that very vague, unspecific references will do little to improve the safety of the average American, but will be very effective in scaring them. The seemingly random references on www.ready.gov to sealing windows and doors, though may be relevant to protecting in a specific disaster circumstance, are confusing and panic provoking on a large scale, and it is very reasonable to assume that senior administration officials realize this. However the millions of people protesting in London, Madrid, Berlin, Rome, New York, Sydney, and Melbourne are sidelined from the American public, as is the embarrassing pro-war presentation of Colin Powell to the UN Security Council by the heightened terror alert. It is no coincidence that the fear created by the increased terror alert comes at a time when this administration is under such scrutiny by its own public and the international community.