

June 4, 2006

17 Held in Plot to Bomb Sites in Ontario

By [IAN AUSTEN](#) and [DAVID JOHNSTON](#)

OTTAWA, June 3 — Seventeen Canadian residents were arrested and charged with plotting to attack targets in southern Ontario with crude but powerful fertilizer bombs, the Canadian authorities said Saturday.

The arrests represented one of the largest counterterrorism sweeps in North America since the attacks of September 2001. American officials said that the plot did not involve any targets in the United States, but added that the full dimension of the plan for attacks was unknown.

At a news conference in Toronto, **home to at least six suspects**, police and intelligence officials said they had been monitoring the group moved in to make the arrests on Friday after the group arranged to take delivery of three tons of ammonium nitrate, a fertilizer that can be made into an explosive when combined with fuel oil.

"It was their intent to use it for a terrorist attack," said Mike McDonell, a Royal Canadian Mounted Police assistant commissioner. He said that by comparison the 1995 bombing of the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City, which killed 168 people, was carried out "with only one ton of ammonium nitrate."

The 17 men were mainly of South Asian descent and most were in their teens or early 20's. One of the men was 30 years old and the oldest was 43 years old, police officials said. None of them had any known affiliation with [Al Qaeda](#).

"They represent the broad strata of our society," Mr. McDonell said. "Some are students, some are employed, some are unemployed."

The Canadian police declined to identify specific targets, though they did dismiss reports **in the news media** that Toronto's subway system was on the list. The Toronto Star, citing an unidentified source, said the group had a list that included the Parliament Buildings in Ottawa as well as the Toronto branch office of the Canadian Security Intelligence Service. At the news conference, officials emphasized that the targets were all in Canada.

In the United States, the arrests reignited fears among **American U.S.** counterterrorism officials about the porous northern border even as the Bush administration and lawmakers have focused attention in recent weeks **about hardening** on tightening the southern border in an effort to stanch the flow of illegal immigrants. Since the arrest of [Ahmed Ressam](#) in December 1999 as he tried to smuggle explosive chemicals into Washington State in a plot to strike targets that included the Los Angeles international airport, authorities have expressed fears that extremists could use Canada as a platform to make attacks inside the United States.

The arrests came at the end of a week of furious debate over federal spending for domestic security, with officials in cities like New York and Washington bitterly criticizing Michael Chertoff, the secretary of homeland security, for not allocating more money to cities thought likely to remain high on the terrorist target list for Al Qaeda and other extremist groups.

The men accused in Canada operated what the police called training camps for its members. At their news conference, the police displayed at least one pistol, electronics components, military fatigues, army-style boots and two-way radios they said were used at the camps, although they would not disclose their locations.

The Toronto Star reported that in 2004 the intelligence agency began monitoring Internet exchanges, some of which were encrypted. According to the newspaper, the training in camps took place north of Toronto. Members of the group, according to that account, often visited a popular Canadian chain of doughnut shops to wash up following their training sessions.

Counterterrorism officials said that interviews with suspects would provide greater clarity about the nature of the plot, but they said that the men had taken a significant step, moving beyond the planning stage, toward acquiring a large quantity of potentially explosive fertilizer.

It was not clear whether the group ever had possession of the chemicals, or whether authorities may have had a role in arranging for the shipment or transporting the material.

A police spokeswoman, Cpl. Michele Paradis, asked whether the group had actually had the three tons of chemicals in their possession, and if the police had "seized" it, replied: "That's difficult to answer. They made arrangements to have it delivered and they took delivery."

American officials said that White House officials and counterterrorism agencies had been briefed on the case, and of the coming arrests, in recent days.

Russ Knocke, a spokesman for the [Department of Homeland Security](#), said, "We are coordinating very closely with our Canadian counterparts." He said Mr. Chertoff spoke early Saturday with Stockwell Day, the Canadian minister of public safety, but added, "We have not made any adjustment to our security posture along the northern border."

The New York City Police Department, which has had a detective assigned as an intelligence liaison with the Toronto police for four years, said it was being kept informed, but had not altered its own security measures.

Even as American officials portrayed the case as mainly a Canadian operation, the arrests so close to the United States border jangled the nerves of intelligence officials who have been warning of the continuing danger posed by small "homegrown" extremist groups, who appeared to operate without any direct control by known leaders of Al Qaeda.

One senior counterterrorism official said there had been extensive contact between American and Canadian authorities in the past several days. Though there appeared to have been no direct threat inside the United States, the proximity of the potential terrorists to the American border "really got everybody's attention," the official said.

American officials were granted anonymity because they were speaking about a continuing investigation.

The [F.B.I.](#) issued a statement on Saturday saying there was a "preliminary indication" that some of the Canadian subjects might have had "limited contact" with two people from Georgia who were recently arrested. Those two were Ehsanul Islam Sadequee, 19, an American of Bangladeshi descent, and Syed Haris Ahmed, 21, a Pakistani-born American.

Law-enforcement officials said the men arrested in Georgia had made "casing" videos of various sites in Washington, D.C., and

have said that their case was linked to the arrests of several men in Britain last fall, and that the two were believed to have met with "like-minded Islamic extremists " in Canada in March 2005.

A counterterrorism official in the United States said that while there was contact between the Georgia men earlier this year and those arrested in Canada on Friday, there was no evidence that the Georgia suspects were involved in the bombing plot.

The suspects were arrested in a series of raids that began late on Friday night and continued until early on Saturday morning, in Toronto, Mississauga and Kingston, a college town southwest of Ottawa.

All of the men under arrest were taken to a heavily fortified police station in Pickering, Ontario, a city east of Toronto. Five were under the age of 18 and not identified by the authorities. The others were identified as Fahim Ahmad, 21; Zakaria Amara, 20; Asad Ansari, 21; Shareef Abdelhaleen, 30; Qayyum Abdul Jamal, 43; Mohammed Dirie, 22; Yasim Abdi Mohamed, 24; Jahmaal James, 23; Amin Mohamed Durrani, 19; Steven Vikash Chand, alias Abdul Shakur, 25; Ahmad Mustafa Ghany, 21; and Saad Khalid, 19.

Alvin Chand, the brother of suspect Steven Vikash Chand, dismissed the police allegations outside the courthouse.

"He's not a terrorist, come on, he's a Canadian citizen" Mr. Chand said, The Canadian Press reported. "The people that were arrested are good people. They go to the mosque. They go to school, go to college."

Anser Farooq, a lawyer from Mississauga who is representing five of the defendants, said a lack of information at Saturday's court hearing made it difficult to assess the case brought by the police.

In court, he said, government lawyers broke with tradition and did not present a synopsis of the reasons for their charges, arguing that they had not had time to prepare it. It will, however, be presented at another hearing on Tuesday.

He declined to identify his clients because he was still formalizing his relationship with some of them. But he said none of the five have a criminal record.

Tarek Fatah, the communications director of the Muslim Canadian Congress, a national group, said that Mr. Jamal, the oldest of the suspects, is a well-known and fiery figure in the Toronto area's South Asian community, and that he was the imam of the Ar-Rahman Quran Learning Center, a mosque in a rented industrial building in Mississauga.

[Immigration](#) from South Asia greatly expanded in Canada beginning in the 1970's, and, like several Canadian cities, Toronto and its suburbs have long had a large and prominent South Asian community. "He took over an otherwise peaceful mosque and threw out the old management," Mr. Fatah said. "There were reports throughout the community of him making hate speeches."

The mosque did not respond to phone messages. "This is the work of people who believe they are victimized when they are not," Mr. Fatah said. "Many Islamacists are preying on the Islamic community."

"Law enforcement agencies have done a great service to the Muslim community by busting this terrorist cell," he added.

Luc Portelance, the assistant director of operations at the Canadian intelligence agency, said the group's members "appear to have become adherents of a violent ideology inspired by Al Qaeda." The police official, however, said that there was no evidence of links

between the two groups.

Canada has not sent troops to Iraq, and officials at the news conference said they did not believe the group was angry over Canada's deployment of troops to Afghanistan.

In a November 2002 audiotape claiming to be a message from [Osama bin Laden](#), Bloomberg reported, Al Qaeda said Canada was "allying themselves with America in attacking us in Afghanistan," and listed five possible targets: Canada, the United States, Britain, Spain and Australia.

The arrests were only the second time that Canadian police have brought charges under anti-terrorism laws passed at the end of 2001. Just over two years ago, Mohammad Momin Khawaja, a software developer in Ottawa, was charged in connection with a bomb plot.

Both the police and a spokeswoman for the intelligence agency declined to say when they first became aware of the Canadian group. In an interview with the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, Mayor David Miller of Toronto said he was given a confidential briefing about the group several months ago.

All but two of the adult suspects appeared at a court north of Toronto in Brampton, Ontario, Saturday afternoon. By late morning, all entrances to the Brampton courthouse were blockaded by steel barriers and police cars. As snipers watched from nearby rooftops, people entering the court were required to remove their shoes and were searched at a series of three command checkpoints.

At the news conference, Mr. McDonnell said, the authorities were successful in shutting down the terrorist group.

"These individuals were allegedly intent on committing acts of terrorism against their own country and their own people," Prime Minister Stephen Harper said in a statement. "Today, Canada's security and intelligence measures worked."

Ian Austen reported from Ottawa for this article, and David Johnston from Washington. Chris Mason contributed reporting from Ontario and Robert Pear from Washington.

Copyright 2006 [The New York Times Company](#)

[Privacy Policy](#) | [Search](#) | [Corrections](#) | [XML](#) | [Help](#) | [Contact Us](#) | [Work for Us](#) | [Site Map](#)

--