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En Route from Urumqi to Beijing:



Xinjiang extremism threatens the world stage

by Philip Baum

On 7th March 2008, it is alleged that a 19-year old woman by the name of Guzalinur Turdi intended to blow up China Southern flight CZ6901 operating between Urumqi, the capital of Xinjiang Province, and China's national capital and 2008 Olympic host city, Beijing.

Turdi managed to infiltrate gasoline onto the aircraft in cans of fizzy drink, having filled them by syringe via small holes made through the aluminium tops which were later sealed to prevent seepage. Like the 9/11 hijackers, simplicity was the order of the day with permissible everyday items being utilised as potential weapons of mass destruction. The traditional Improvised Explosive Device, with its four component parts, was further consigned to the history books and replaced by a simple schoolboy Improvised Incendiary Device working on the principle of the Triangle of Fire: Heat + Fuel + Oxygen = Fire.

Incident reports vary yet it would appear that our female suicide bomber was a frequent flyer who arose from her seat and, much like the Chechen Black Widows who had caused the destruction of two Russian airliners in 2004, made her way to the over-wing toilets of the B-757. She then closed the door behind her and emptied the contents of the cans on the floor and fittings. According to current reports, it would appear that Turdi fortunately suffered a bout of nerves and failed to ignite her highly inflammable deposit. As she left the toilets, crewmembers who were standing by having become

concerned about the amount of time she had spent inside, noticed a distinct smell of gasoline and decided to search the toilets where, in the rubbish bin, they found the empty cans. They restrained Turdi and the flight eventually diverted to Lanzhou where she was arrested and later confessed.

It should be noted that some reports cite an accomplice whose task it may have been to ignite the gasoline, whilst others state that her "minder" did not board the flight on the day in question but had flown with her previously on two surveillance missions.

The lessons are plenty. For the international aviation security community we have been reminded, once again, of the fact that terrorists operate the "keep it simple" approach. Gasoline is even easier to obtain than homemade explosives and the use of such a fuel in the Glasgow Airport attack of 2007 demonstrates the desire of terrorists to render out-of-date many of our state-of-the-art screening technologies. For China, since plagued by media coverage of the Tibetan crisis, it sounded a pre-Olympic warning shot that their impending few months in the global spotlight could also encourage beleaguered nationalist entities to use the world's premier sporting event as a way to highlight their cause.

Unsurprisingly, the world press corps paid scant attention to the China Southern incident. Like the aforementioned sabotage of Sibir and Volga-Aviaexpress aircraft in Russia, with a cumulative death toll of 87, or the destruction of a China Northern flight in 2002, with 112

casualties (interesting also destroyed by gasoline when a passenger named Zhang Pilin, suffering from cancer, set fire to the cabin having purchased up to seven life insurance policies before boarding), there is little media focus on such disasters. If it were to have happened in the United States we would be witnessing a raft of new security measures being introduced globally but, hey, it's only China where quarter of the world live!

Indeed, remember the alleged 2006 liquid explosive plot in the UK? We are witnessing the effect at checkpoints worldwide every day. 7th March 2008 was no plot; it was real, yet the response was zilch!

In terms of media dual standards, the comparison is somewhat akin to the tragic disappearance of a four-year-old on holiday with her parents in Portugal remaining in the international headlines for months on end, whilst hundreds dying in floods in Bangladesh being assigned a one-off paragraph in the middle pages of the press and never making the television news.

We might yet be forced to pay attention to regional conflicts. As the athletes and spectators, including prominent politicians, cross the "Free Tibet" picket line, this August could see Xinjiang politics come into focus, in the same way that Palestinian terrorists utilised the 1972 Munich Olympiad.

Turdi is supposedly from China's Turkic Muslim Uighur minority and ascribes to the belief that Xinjiang Province, which has a predominantly Muslim population, should become an independent nation called East Turkestan. Whilst Xinjiang's Uighur

militants and their pre-eminent group the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM) might be alien to most readers, analysts point out that China has long been claiming that it is this organisation that poses the greatest threat to the Olympic Games. So much so that, in January this year, the Chinese authorities, claiming that ETIM had links with al Qaeda, killed two of their number and arrested fifteen others, neutralising the operational effectiveness of the group, or so they claimed.

Some sceptics argue that *if* there was an attempted bombing of CZ6901, it was probably staged by the Chinese authorities to justify their treatment of the Uighur people rather than as a real act of terrorism. They argue that the absence of incident data (and even proof) and the fact that the aircraft landed in Lanzhou, off-loaded Turdi and continued on its way to Beijing, rather than being treated as a crime scene, is evidence of the incident being far less than it was purported to be. This author's contacts in the region view this scepticism as yet another story for conspiracy theorists.

Turkestan itself covers a swathe of land from Turkey in the West to Xinjiang

Province in the East. West Turkestan consists of lands within many sovereign states, whereas East Turkestan is exclusively on Chinese governed soil. The reality is that ETIM and the other Xinjiang-based terror group, the East Turkestan Liberation Organisation (ETLO), both appear to be receiving their funding from Pakistani sources, further linking them to al Qaeda and the Taliban in the eyes of the US State Department which, along with the governments of China, Kazakhstan and Pakistan, has categorised ETIM as an official terrorist group.

Many Uighurs have been detained at Guantanamo. However, it would appear that there are two types of Uighur militants, those who subscribe to the al Qaeda philosophy and base themselves in Pakistan and those who are pro-Western and live in Albania, Kosovo and Turkey. May 2006 saw the release of five Guantanamo detainees who, being pro-Western, were extradited to Albania, given that the US government feared that the Chinese government would execute them if they were returned to Xinjiang.

It is, of course, the al Qaeda strain that poses the greatest concern to the

international community. In 2006 al Qaeda's Second-in-Command, Ayman al Zawahiri made it clear that he considers Xinjiang to be land historically belonging to the Muslim peoples and that, as such, it should be returned to their rule. Such proclamations can be of little comfort to Chinese authorities hoping to showcase their state by means of the Olympics.

China has long avoided the world media's gaze, yet must now acknowledge that regional nationalists may seize a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to be heard. Regardless as to the rights and wrongs of such protests, we are witnessing these tactics in the streets of Lhasa as Tibetan nationalists sense an opportunity. Copycat actions in Xinjiang or actual acts of terrorism emanating from the region are to be expected and guarded against.

Internationally we can ignore the issue at our peril. If Xinjiang seems too far from home then, at the very least, we should consider the China Southern experience as a case study to sensitise our screeners to the latest modus operandi of those with terrorist ideologies. It needs to be a global reassessment rather than just in Urumqi.

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