

Is Bush preparing war on Libya?

by Joseph Brewda

Four days prior to the unexpected release of two British and American hostages in Lebanon on Nov. 18, the U.S. Justice Department suddenly issued indictments against two purported Libyan intelligence officials for the bombing of a Pan American jet over Lockerbie, Scotland in 1988. A total of 270 people, including the plane's passengers and crew as well as 11 people on the ground, were killed. The indictment, for which there is no compelling public evidence, in effect exonerates Syria and Iran, two states which had been previously tied to the incident by investigators from several nations. Prior to mid-November, Libya had not even been publicly considered as a possible subject.

"Syria has taken a bum rap on this," Bush told the press on Nov. 14, when announcing the indictments. He would give no reasons why he could say this, and even the normally compliant media have been skeptical, with the London *Financial Times*, for example, linking the exoneration to a Mideast peace-conference deal. Roughly two weeks earlier the French had issued an arrest warrant for four other Libyans, including Col. Muammar Qaddafi's brother-in-law, for supposedly bombing a French commercial jet over Niger in 1989. Simultaneously, the establishment media have resurfaced the old scare stories that Libya is building a poison gas plant.

A cynical deal?

Only a week before the indictments, diplomats in Beirut were telling the world press that the possibility of a near-term hostage release by the Iranian and Syrian organizations holding the seven remaining western hostages was remote, especially while the Arab-Israeli peace talks were going on. Three days after the indictment, and on the eve of the release, the *Teheran Times* "predicted" the imminent release of Church of England envoy Terry Waite (also known to be a British intelligence official) and an American—who turned out to be Beirut academic Thomas Sutherland. Following their release, U.S. and British spokesmen have predicted that the five remaining hostages will all be released by Christmas, as part of the comprehensive package deal made possible by the Gulf war.

In its response to the indictments, Libyan government TV accused the U.S. of making it a "scapegoat in the deal

to release the western hostages," and termed the charges a "serious lie." The Libyan media have also noted the coincidence of the charges with the collapse of the U.S. stock market and have said the charges are meant to "divert attention" from America's economic ills.

France and the U.S. have no extradition treaty with Libya, and the U.S. and Libya no diplomatic relations at all. Libya has proposed trying the accused before the World Court of Justice in The Hague, but the U.S. has already let be known that it will reject this offered compromise, and is deliberately pushing the crisis.

Part of the context may be the ongoing Bush-initiated Mideast peace talks, which Libya opposes. The talks may lead to a separate Israeli-Syrian peace, with Syria regaining the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights. Earlier, Bush forked over most of Lebanon to Syrian President Hafez al-Assad, and allowed him to exterminate the Lebanese opposition, as his reward for assistance in the Gulf war.

Bombs away

White House spokesman Marlin Fitzwater has already reported that Bush will be "consulting" with British Prime Minister John Major and "other world leaders," to "fashion together a cooperative response." National Security Adviser Brent Scowcroft, it is said, has been detailed to put together a new coalition modeled on that assembled against Iraq.

Unidentified U.S. officials have been quoted in the U.S. media saying that a world embargo of Libyan oil exports and a boycott of commercial air flights to and from Libya are among the moves being considered. Other escalating diplomatic and economic measures, possibly under U.N. Security Council aegis, are reportedly being considered, preparatory to military action. Kidnaping the two alleged terrorists is even being discussed. The newly appointed U.S. Attorney General, William Barr, had earlier issued the legal opinion authorizing the 1989 invasion of Panama in order to bring Gen. Manuel Noriega to trial.

That Bush is contemplating military action, among other extra-legal operations against Libya, is already being indicated. "Hmmm," Bush grunted, and smirked, when asked if military action were being considered, on the day that the indictments were issued. In an address before a U.S. newspaper publishers meeting in Florida on Nov. 19, Bush was more explicit. "We've not ruled any option in or out," he said. "We've been looking at possible responses beyond seeking to bring the accused two to trial." Bush also said that he would ensure that any "prudent decision" he makes on retaliation has the support of the American people. He used identical phraseology prior to the war against Iraq.

Regional observers note that the same sort of language and charges were leveled in 1986 prior to the U.S. bombing raid on Qaddafi's home which killed his adopted daughter. At that time, Ronald Reagan cited alleged Libyan responsibility for a terrorist bombing in Berlin as the justification.