

3 more appear in London court over terror plot

AFP, London

Three more suspects in an alleged plot to blow up US-bound passenger jets appeared in magistrates court in London yesterday after being charged with preparing acts of terrorism.

Nabeel Hussain, 22, Mohammed Shamin Uddin, 35, and Mohammed Yasar Gulzar, 25, all from London, brought to 11 the total number of suspects facing the most serious charge of conspiracy to murder and preparing acts of terrorism.

The three bearded men, flanked by guards, wore identical white sweatshirts as they appeared briefly at City of Westminster magistrates court.

Hussain's request for bail was refused, and no bail application was made for Uddin or Gulzar, as the trio were remanded in custody until Monday when they will reappear at the Old Bailey criminal court alongside their co-accused.

Hussain, Gulzar and Uddin are charged with having "conspired with other persons to murder other persons" and acting "with the intention of committing acts of terrorism" by intending "to smuggle the component parts of improvised explosive devices onto aircraft and assemble and detonate them on board," a police statement said Tuesday.

Four others face lesser charges, including withholding information about a possible attack and possession of documents that would be useful to terrorists.

Some 25 people have been arrested in connection with the alleged plot since police carried out pre-dawn raids on August 10. Five have since been released without charge.

Security at British airports was stepped up to unprecedented

levels in the aftermath of the police raids, and the national threat level ramped up to "critical" -- the highest of five levels.

The suspects were allegedly planning to smuggle seeming innocuous liquids on to planes with the intention of assembling them into bombs on board. The alleged plot was described by one senior police officer as "an attempt to commit mass murder on an unimaginable scale".

The other eight to appear in court Monday are Ahmed Abdullah Ali, 25, Tanvir Hussain, 25, Umar Islam, 28, Arafat Waheed Khan, 25,

Assad Ali Sarwar, 26, Adam Khatib, 19, Ibrahim Savant, 25, Waheed Zaman, 25.

Umar Hussain, 24, was last week charged under anti-terror legislation for failing to disclose information about Nabeel Hussain, his brother.

The remaining three were remanded in custody on Tuesday when they made brief appearances in magistrates court.

Two are charged with withholding information about an impending terrorist attack -- Mehran Hussain, 23, another of Nabeel Hussain's brothers, and Cossar Ali, 24, the

wife of Ahmed Abdullah Ali and mother to an eight-month baby.

The third, a 17-year-old youth who cannot be named because he is a minor, was accused of possessing a book about bomb-making, suicide notes and wills, and a map of Afghanistan with information "likely to be useful" to someone planning an attack. He is due to next appear in court on September 10.

Umar Hussain is due in court on Friday, while Mehran Hussain is due in court on September 19. Cossar Ali will appear on Tuesday.



Police vans carrying the three terror suspects arrive at the City of Westminster Magistrate's Court in central London, yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP

Pakistan again detains former Lashkar chief

AFP, Islamabad

The former head of the Lashkar-e-Taiba Kashmiri militant group in Pakistan has been detained a day after his release from house arrest, his spokesman said yesterday.

Hafiz Mohammad Saeed was picked up from his residence in the eastern city of Lahore late Tuesday and taken to a detention facility in a neighbouring town.

"He returned home after the government released him on the orders of the Lahore High Court on Monday and was with his family when police raided his residence late Tuesday," Mujahid said.

He said police detained Saeed under a maintenance of public order ordinance, a law under which authorities can detain a person considered a threat to public peace for up to three months without charge.

Saeed abandoned Lashkar-e-Taiba in January 2002 -- just before it was banned by Pakistan's military ruler President Pervez Musharraf -- and set up the Islamic charity Jamaat-ud-Dawa, regarded as its political wing.

Lashkar-e-Taiba is on the US watch list of terrorist organisations and has been blamed for several major attacks, including a December 2001 assault on the Indian parliament which brought India and Pakistan to the brink of war.

Indian law enforcement officials suspect Lashkar-e-Taiba and another group called the Students Islamic Movement of India played a role in July's serial train blasts in Mumbai which killed 183 people.

Pakistan briefly placed Saeed under house arrest in February to prevent a protest over cartoons of the Prophet Mohammed in European newspapers. He was also held in late 2002 but the courts declared his detention at that time was illegal.

China allows its Panchen Lama to visit home village in Tibet

AFP, Beijing

China has allowed its own Panchen Lama to visit his village, state media said yesterday, in the latest attempt to give more exposure to the boy whom it is grooming to replace the Dalai Lama.

The visit marked the first time Gyaincain Norbu has returned to his home county of Lhari since he was chosen by China in 1995 as the reincarnation of the 10th Panchen Lama, after Beijing rejected the Dalai Lama's choice.

The boy has been under strict tutelage in Beijing since his ordination, but since he turned 16 in February China has allowed him greater exposure, apparently believing he has come of age.

Xinhua news agency said thousands of Buddhists and horsemen dotted roads to greet the boy, now 16, as he arrived in Lhari, Nagqu prefecture in northern Tibet, for the three-day visit that began Sunday. During the visit, he presided over a blessing ritual for nearly 4,000 local people and urged young Tibetans to get a good education to build a more prosperous Tibet.

He also donated money and goods to a local school, a hospital and 43 poor families, Xinhua said.

The teenager stopped his car more than a dozen times on his journey to give blessings to followers who braved the rain and came long distances for a chance to see the 11th Panchen Lama, Xinhua said.

Vietnamese dissident released

AFP, Hanoi

Prominent Vietnamese dissident and pro-democracy activist Pham Hong Son was released early from prison yesterday as part of a presidential amnesty, his wife said.

"He is in a car, on the way home. I could talk to him on the phone," his wife Vu Thuy Ha told AFP by telephone.

Ha said she went to his jail in Thanh Hoa province Wednesday morning, two hundred kilometers south of Hanoi, but then learned her husband had been taken home by police on a different road.

"He is very happy to be released but he heard today about the death of his father (few days ago). He asked whether he could visit his mother immediately, but police refused," she said.

Son, a 37-year-old businessman and trained doctor, was released several months before the end of a five-year sentence for espionage.

Authorities told journalists he would start a three-year sentence of house arrest. Son was arrested in Hanoi on March 27, 2002, a few weeks after translating and publishing online an article entitled "What is democracy?" from the US State Department website.

Egypt's Nobel author Nagib Mahfuz passes away

AFP, Cairo

Nagib Mahfuz, Egypt's most celebrated author and the only Arab to win the Nobel prize for literature, died yesterday at the age of 94, several weeks after his health suddenly deteriorated.

"He (Mahfuz) suffered a cardiac arrest Tuesday at 7:00 pm but doctors resuscitated him. He had another one today at 8:00 am and this time there was failure," a close friend told AFP.

He is to be buried today with a funeral at Cairo's Al-Rashdan mosque, where ceremonies are often held for honored public figures, interior ministry sources said, suggesting President Hosni Mubarak may attend.

Mahfuz, who almost died in 1994 when a radical Islamist stabbed him with a knife, was admitted to interior ministry hospital in mid-July suffering from various kidney problems, pneumonia and other ailments related to his age.

He was almost completely deaf and blind at the time of his death.

Mahfuz was taken to intensive care on August 14 and had remained in critical condition ever since despite improving slightly in recent days.

"He was the last of the pioneers," Mahfuz's friend and biographer Raymond Stock told AFP. "He was the only Egyptian who perfectly blended the East and the West."

Born in Cairo in December 1911, Mahfuz was Egypt's most renowned intellectual with about 50 novels to his name. He began writing at the age of 17 and had his first novel published in 1939.

A flurry of other novels followed but it was the Cairo trilogy -- Between the Palaces, Palace of Longing and Sugarhouse -- published between 1955 and 1957, that brought his name to the forefront of Arab literature.

The books, depicting traditional urban life, tell of a family



living through the first half of the century when Egypt went from British colonial rule to independence under a monarchy.

In 1988, Mahfuz became the first Arab writer to be awarded the Nobel prize for literature, notably for the universal character of his art, which was considered a metaphor for relations between people in communities worldwide.

"Many classified him as a 19th century-style novelist after the trilogy but in my opinion he surpassed many of the greats from the West," Stock said.

"Although his physical condition deteriorated, his mental powers grew, his literary powers also continued to grow. He learned how to write entire novels in one paragraph."

Nearly half of Mahfuz's novels have been made into films which have circulated throughout the Arabic-speaking world. He wrote more than 100 short stories, many of which have been translated into English.

A lover of Cairo's sprawling cafes, many of his works centre around life in the bustling city, bringing out its uniquely "Egyptian" character just as a national identity was being defined.

"Mahfuz treated people like an Egyptian and time like a German. He lived a very regimented and disciplined life," Stock said.

Until a few weeks before his death, the writer's frail figure could still occasionally be seen at his favourite Cairo cafes among one of his many circles of friends.

Throughout his life, the author was actively interested in politics, staunchly defending a spirit of tolerance and acceptance.

His novel, Children of Gebelawi, published in 1959, was banned by Egypt's Islamic Al-Azhar University for the disillusioned view it gave of religion. The book brought more trouble for him in the 1980s, when the fundamentalist Jihad group said Mahfuz should be killed for blasphemy over the book.

UN watchdog to issue Iran nuke report today

AFP, Vienna

The United Nations nuclear watchdog is expected today to confirm that Iran has failed to suspend strategic nuclear fuel work, opening the door to possible UN sanctions against Tehran.

Iran has made clear that it intends to pursue uranium enrichment which it began earlier this year. Enrichment makes fuel for nuclear power reactors but can also produce the raw material for atom bombs.

"Production of nuclear fuel is one of Iran's strategic objectives," Iran's chief nuclear negotiator Ali Larjani said Sunday. "Any action to limit or deprive Iran could not force Iran to give up this goal."

The UN Security Council has demanded that Iran suspend all uranium enrichment and reprocessing activities by August 31, amid US-led concerns that Tehran's nuclear programme is a cover for an attempt to produce an atomic bomb.

Six world powers have also proposed talks on Iran receiving trade, technology and security benefits if it suspends enrichment.

The Vienna-based International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) is to verify whether Tehran has complied with Security Council deadline.

It is all but certain that Iran is continuing enrichment activities but there

could be a hitch, diplomats said.

Russia and China already resist sanctions and their reluctance could be strengthened if it turns out that Iran is at this point not actually enriching uranium but only working with "dry running" the centrifuge machines which carry out the process.

The reason could be simple: while Iran enriched a small amount of uranium in April it has since then had technical problems as it must first master the process of running cascades of centrifuges, with each machine spinning uranium gas at supersonic speeds.

The tall, tube-like centrifuges break down easily.

"I hear that the attrition rate on their centrifuge machines is very high," said Gary Samore, a non-proliferation expert who worked in former President Bill Clinton's administration and is now at the MacArthur Foundation in Chicago.

While some diplomats have said spinning centrifuges dry, with inert gas for example, could be a compromise on suspension, US officials have said that even running the machines without uranium gas would help Iran move towards the so-called "break-out capacity" of having the technology needed to make nuclear weapons.

Chavez hails Syria's shared rejection of US 'imperialism'

AFP, Damascus

Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez, hailed here as a hero for Arabs, began his first visit to fellow US arch-foe Syria yesterday saying both countries rejected American "imperialism and hegemony".

"We have the same position: we reject the American empire's imperialism and attempts at hegemony," Chavez was quoted as saying by local media as he began his visit aimed at consolidating relations between the two countries.

Syrian President Bashar al-Assad stressed that the position of Damascus and Caracas on international issues were "very close," adding: "We reject unipolarity."

Talks between Chavez and Assad - both persistent thorns in Washington's side - are to focus on the regional situation and bilateral relations, a Syrian official told AFP.

Agreements on oil, energy and culture are also expected to be signed during the two-day visit, the source said.

Chavez was a fierce critic of Israel's month-long offensive in Lebanon and has found common ground with Syria, which has irked the West with its declarations of support for Hezbollah Shiite militants in Lebanon.

Flamboyant former paratrooper Chavez arrived from Asia, where in China last week he denounced



Hugo Chavez

Israel's war against Hezbollah in Lebanon as "genocide," likening its action to war crimes committed by Adolf Hitler.

His trip to Damascus follows a visit by Venezuela's deputy foreign minister to Syria earlier this month.

The arrival of Chavez, who staged a failed coup in 1992 before being elected president in 2002, provides "support for Syria's positions on the Israeli-Arab conflict and Lebanon," said Elias Murad, editor of the official Baath daily.

Caracas and Damascus both "reject" pressures from Washington, but for different reasons, Murad told AFP, as the US wants to "overthrow" Chavez and "surround" Syria by supporting anti-regime elements, in particular Israel.

Smart-1 set for death plunge

AFP, Paris

One of the most innovative missions in space exploration comes to a dramatic close on Sunday when Europe's first probe to the Moon crashes into the lunar surface in a suicide ride.

A small army of terrestrial astronomers will be training their telescopes on the southwestern side of the Moon's face, hoping to glimpse the cloud of dust that will signal SMART-1's mortal impact in a plain called the Lake of Excellence.

"It will be a very shallow trajectory," says mission scientist Bernard Foing.

"It's possible that much of the probe's structure will be preserved from the impact, accidentally creating a sculpture or a monument for future generations which says 'here you are, that was Europe's first attempt to explore the Moon.'"

The spectacular end, scheduled for Sunday, is intended to be a more useful alternative to letting the European Space Agency (ESA) craft crash anywhere or at any time through orbital decay and lack of fuel.

Over the past three years, operating with a full-time staff of just seven and a total budget of just 120 million

euros (151 million dollars), the little probe has been patiently testing new technology that one day could help put Man on Mars.

Scientists also believe it will yield a fresh look at the Moon, revealing Earth's satellite as a place of surprising complexity and promise rather than a lifeless rock with little to offer except grey dust.

"SMART-1 is the vanguard" of

future space missions, said the craft's operations manager, Octavio Camino-Ramos.

Driving the probe since it was placed into orbit in September 2003 is an ion thruster, an engine type that has only been used once before -- with the US craft Deep Space 1, launched in 1998 to rendezvous with an asteroid and then a comet.

Ion engines are fuelled by xenon

gas. The gas atoms are charged by electric guns powered by solar panels and are then expelled from the rear of the spacecraft, delivering a tiny thrust, visible as a ghostly blue glow.

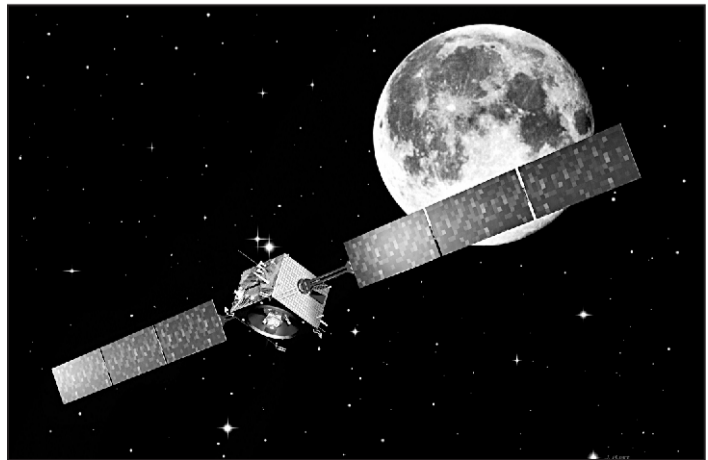
Compared with the blast, roar and smoke of chemical rockets, ion engines seem almost laughably puny.

But chemical engines burn out after a couple of minutes, whereas an ion engine can push on gently for months or even years, for so long as the Sun shines and the small supply of propellant lasts.

In the frictionless vacuum of space, ion engines, by sipping patiently at their fuel, can slowly but relentlessly build up speed.

That makes them ideal for long-range missions where time is not a big factor but payload space is precious.

Unlike the Deep Space mission's essentially straight-line trajectories, SMART-1 had to carry out a complex series of manoeuvres. It had to loop again and again around the Earth to gain extra speed yet also juggle with the Moon's gravitational tug, all the time using a tiny engine that delivered the same power as someone picking up an A4-sized sheet of paper.



Artist's impression image shows Smart-1 travelling to the Moon using a new solar-electric propulsion system.

PHOTO: AFP