

Mystery surrounds Niger air explosion

by Thierry Lalevé

One hundred seventy passengers were killed on Sept. 19 when the DC-10 operated by the French company UTA exploded above the Tenere Desert between Chad and Niger. Yet, this event, which rivals the Dec. 21, 1988 bombing aboard Pan American Flight 103 over Lockerbie, England, which killed 270 people, has drawn little attention. In the United States, it was secondary news, overshadowed by news of a U.S. Air Boeing 737 which skidded into the East River at New York's LaGuardia Airport. Was the Niger bombing played down just because it happened in Central Africa, with most of the passengers being black Africans; or, was it because it might raise embarrassing questions?

More than a week after it occurred, it has become evident that, however difficult the actual police and intelligence investigations will be, the main issue in finding the culprits will be a matter of political will—especially the political will to point the accusing finger not at some ostensibly “independent” terrorist organization, but at the state or states which sponsored it. Indeed, just as the mystery of Lockerbie has remained unsolved so far, because of Washington's reluctance to name either Syria or Iran, that is very likely the reason why the Niger crash has not made headlines outside of France. Coming just a few days before the summit between Soviet Foreign Minister Eduard Shevardnadze and U.S. Secretary of State James Baker III in Wyoming, U.S. agencies were not eager to start denouncing any state which just happened to be Moscow's ally.

Cynics, or “realists” as they are sometimes known, add that because of the high level of tension between Washington and Paris over the Middle East, and Lebanon in particular, some American officials considered that the bombing as Paris “paying the price of its adventures” in the region.

Hezbollah implicated

Preliminary and scattered investigations are nonetheless pointing in a definite direction. UT-772 was blown up by a 10-kilogram charge of Semtex explosive, loaded onto the plane at its point of departure, Congo-Brazzaville. Though officials in Congo claim that each piece of luggage was checked twice before departure, Congo's Maya Maya airport is known for its lax security—especially since no less than the personal guard of the Congolese President includes many

Palestinians element associated with the Syrian-sponsored rejectionist front. Moreover, the region has also seen the rapid spread in the last two years of Hezbollah Shi'ite cells from West Africa, especially from Sierra Leone, Senegal, and Ivory Coast, into the Central African Republic, Gabon, and Cameroon.

Besides the creation of a clandestine infrastructure, the growth of the Hezbollah is also part of a broader political design. Iranian leaders have assessed that, in coming years, they could fill the political vacuum in many countries which, like Senegal two years ago, are confronted with a social and economic crisis. In the final analysis, the growth of the Hezbollah is a direct political challenge to the longstanding relationship between the African countries and France, in particular.

Investigations are narrowing on the Hezbollah networks as having provided the logistics for the bombings, and further questions are being raised about the origins of the Semtex, and about which terror organization sponsored the operations and on whose behalf. Several reports are already circulating linking the bomb to the cells of the PFLP-General Command of Ahmed Jibril, which was supposedly dismantled last winter in West Germany, just prior to the Lockerbie bombing. One unconfirmed hypothesis suggests that the same kind of portable radio-tape recorder was used, as that used for the Lockerbie bombing and previously found in the PFLP-GC's safehouse in Germany.

Yet, such a *modus operandi* implicates not only the PFLP-GC, but also such well-known explosives experts as the May 15 group of Abu Ibrahim. The latter group, no longer operationally independent, has joined a pool which is variously used either by the PFLP-GC or the Abu Nidal organization.

A look at recent events in Lebanon also shows further integration among these groups. Over this past summer, a series of meetings took place, resulting in the establishment of a broad coalition in Lebanon which sees Hezbollah, Amal, Jibril, and Abu Nidal operating jointly in the south, with the last two organizations sharing training camps. Such cooperation makes it most unlikely for Hezbollah cells to decide independently, somewhere in West Africa, to order the killing of 170 passengers. As one French official was quoted in the Paris daily *Le Figaro* Sept 22, such a move is an “act of war, sponsored by a state.”

But which state? *Le Figaro* on Sept. 27 gave part of the answer in its headline, “Syria's Shadow.” But, not only Syria, but also Iran would have most likely involved in such an operation. The precise motive for the bombing, however, remains unclear. It could have been an act of retaliation against France's policy in Lebanon against Syria. Some have indicated that the targets may have been two passengers involved in a large arms sale to the Lebanese Christians; but this may be a mere convergence of events, since it is rare that an entire plane is blown up just for two passengers.