

## **Bosnia: Aid Worker Linked with Bin Laden**

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Bosnian police sources claim a recent inquiry into the activities of a controversial aid worker reveal links with al-Qaeda leader.

Bosnian police raids on the premises of the Islamic relief agency Benevolence International Foundation, BIF, have allegedly provided evidence of links between the organisation's director Enaam Arnaout and the al-Qaeda network.

Arnaout was arrested in Chicago on April 30 and is currently awaiting trial in the United States on perjury charges. If convicted, he faces a five-year prison term and a 250,000 US dollar fine.

The US Federal Bureau of Investigations brought the perjury charges after Arnaout filed a written statement to a US court on April 5, 2002, claiming that BIF had "never provided aid to people or organisations known to be engaged in violence, terrorist activities, or military operations of any nature".

Arnaout was suing the US government over its December 14, 2001 decision to ban the BIF - an organisation Washington claimed was engaged in aiding terrorism - and freeze its assets. The FBI claims to possess evidence supporting the charges from four cooperative witnesses - including captured al-Qaeda members - and from documents seized during raids on BIF premises in Bosnia-Herzegovina.

Bosnian police raided the BIF head office, warehouse and homes of leading members of the organisation in Sarajevo and Zenica on March 19, 2002. According to police sources, evidence was uncovered which confirms that close links existed between Arnaout and Bin Laden in the late 1980s and early 1990s. The documents included photographs of the two men posing with automatic rifles, anti-aircraft guns and hand-held rocket launchers, possibly in Afghanistan just over a decade ago.

According to the FBI, several al-Qaeda members occupied important posts in BIF and the organisation financed the group's activities. It also alleges that Arnaout enjoyed the full confidence of Bin Laden.

Following the March 19 raids, Bosnian police arrested Munib Zahiragic - a former member of the Bosnian intelligence service, AID, and BIF's chief representative in Bosnia since mid 2000. Around 100 highly classified AID documents were allegedly found in Zahiragic's office. The papers related to wartime and post-war Islamic volunteers from African and Asian countries.

The Bosnian federal supreme court has launched an inquiry and a warrant has been issued for Zahiragic's arrest on espionage charges.

The FBI also claims that several telephone conversations between Arnaout and Zahiragic were recorded in which the BIF boss instructs Zahiragic not to tell the police anything about their relationship.

When Zahiragic confesses he has already told police certain things, Arnaout allegedly suggests the BIF representative should say they have known each other for several years but had only been in business together for 18 months.

The FBI charges indicate the US authorities plan to use these recordings as evidence that Arnaout has

sought to obstruct criminal investigations.

Arnaout was born in Syria in 1962 and, according to the FBI, his family later moved to Saudi Arabia where he lived until 1987. Arnaout then travelled to Peshawar in Pakistan where he undertook Islamic studies. It was in Pakistan that he met a rich Saudi sheikh, Adil Abdul Galil Batargy, who founded BIF in the mid 1980s.

When the Saudi authorities banned the charity from working in Jeddah, Arnaout registered it in the United States in March 1992 and became its senior executive director.

Bosnian police claim Arnaout first came to their country in June 1992, opening the first BIF office in Zenica in June 1993. In October of that year, according to court papers, Arnaout was arrested on arms smuggling charges during a visit to Croatia, although he later escaped from prison.

The US media has recently pointed out weaknesses in the US government's pursuit of Arnaout and his alleged links with Bin Laden in the late 1980s.

On April 7, the Los Angeles Times quoted senior US officials who said the decision to freeze the assets of several Islamic aid agencies had been premature and based on little solid proof. Many of those who work with Arnaout praise his humanitarian efforts and believe the allegations against him are utterly baseless.

"Arnaout is a modern, Western-oriented manager of a big organisation," said Alen Cosic, head of the BIF office in Zenica and the only member of the charity not to be arrested after the recent raids. "All those who work with Arnaout know how noble a man he is."

BIF takes care of some 450 orphans in central Bosnia, providing them with an income of 70 German marks per month. The organisation also organises computer training courses, English and Arabic language classes, sewing workshops and a free dental service.

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