

Comment: Skopje Media 'Invents' Terror Threat

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The Macedonian press was recently quick to damn a humanitarian aid convoy as an attempted terrorist incursion. As usual, the real story never got out.

Terrorists - normally elusive types - have taken to popping up all over the place; they even travel in huge convoys, according to the Macedonian-language press.

The highest-circulation daily in Macedonia, *Dnevnik*, reported last month that a convoy organised by Merhamet, the Muslim humanitarian organisation, was prohibited from entering the country after failing a veterinarian border check. The paper then revealed the "real reason" it had been barred, claiming that "according to foreign intelligence sources" it is a branch of al-Qaeda, Osama bin Laden's militant organisation.

The same "foreign intelligence sources" had also disclosed that "the so-called humanitarian aid was really destined for the ANA (The Albanian National Army)" - a radical group that does not recognise the Ohrid Peace Agreement and is threatening to wage war against the Macedonian authorities.

The article, citing Macedonian security services, also said the humanitarian group attempted to register in Skopje, but was turned down and subsequently opened an office in Kosovo.

Merhamet responded by calling a press conference at which staff produced documents proving that the organisation is legally registered in Macedonia and that the humanitarian aid in question had been sent by the Saudi government. It said the relief consignment, which consisted of canned food, powdered milk, meat products and military winter jackets, was intended for internally displaced people and for those whose houses were destroyed during last years fighting.

Merhamet also distributed copies of a fax which the police claim they received from a shipping company, tipping them off as to the "intended" recipients of the aid. It claimed it could prove that the fax was fabricated by the Macedonian interior ministry and that the shipping company didn't even exist.

In addition, Merhamet said that its 23-truck convoy paid 40 thousand US dollars to wait at the border for three weeks before it was finally refused entrance - and sources within the group claimed that police officers demanded three trucks of food for themselves.

Disregarding Merhamet's statements, the national TV station Sitel, in one of its standard "informative comments", claimed that Interpol had confirmed Merhamet's links with al-Qaeda, which "according to the CIA" had caused problems in Kosovo.

The plot thickened when the Macedonian minister of labour and social policy, Bedredin Ibraimi, subsequently told TV Era, an Albanian station in Skopje, that he and his party, the Democratic Party of Albanians, DPA, had done everything possible to assist the convoy's entrance to the country, but "certain events" had overridden his ministerial authority. Ibraimi said that the goods, which were being stored at the Greek port of Thessalonica, would soon enter Macedonia.

The barred humanitarian aid is now on its way to Macedonia, this time by train. Merhamet has received a personal guarantee from Prime Minister Ljubco Georgievski that there will be no problems with customs and police this time. Known for their "selective" reporting, neither *Dnevnik* nor Sitel, have relayed this

information.

Nor have Dnevnik or Sitel explained why, if there really was evidence from the Macedonian police, Interpol and that CIA proving that Merhamet is providing aid for terrorists to use against the Macedonian state, the organisation is functioning freely and openly in the country. Even the Macedonian public prosecutor, who is required by law to investigate suspected terrorism threats, has given no credence to Dnevnik and Sitel's claims. Nor did the police.

Are they also really claiming that the Saudi ministry of finance, which donated the aid in question, is a branch of Bin Laden's organisation? And why did the prime minister throw his support behind Merhamet?

Of course, neither Dnevnik nor Sitel have told the real story in this case, which concerns their own use of non-existent "intelligence sources" to back up distorted stories with no real basis. They hope that some people will be convinced by their "facts" - and unfortunately, some are.

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