

## **Sarajevo Hit by Bin Laden Panic**

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The closure of the US and UK embassies in Bosnia is rumoured to be linked to Bin Laden terror threat

Embassies and other agencies of the United States and Britain were suddenly closed in Sarajevo until further notice on Wednesday because of an unspecified "credible threat" to their security. The US also shut down its consulates in Mostar and Banja Luka.

A Western diplomat serving in Bosnia said, "The embassy closures were a result of information intercepted by intelligence services. I am not in a position to say if this is linked to al-Qaeda or any other terrorist organisation but I think it is related to individuals in Bosnia. It is a serious threat."

Bosnian prime minister Zlatko Lagumdžija said authorities are providing additional protection for unspecified facilities used by international organisations. He said Bosnian officials are in "constant communication" with their US counterparts but would not define the nature of the threat.

An official from the British Foreign Office told IWPR that the UK

embassy was closed because of "increased international tension". The official, who asked not to be named, added that "appropriate security action" was undertaken to protect British nationals abroad.

Until the closures on October 17, authorities had shown little concern at the prospect of Osama bin Laden's al-Qaeda movement spreading its activities to Bosnia. On Friday October 12 US Lt. Gen. John Sylvester, commander of SFOR, told a press conference, "I have no concerns about any mujahedin threat in Bosnia at all."

But tension among ordinary people had been running high ever since the September 11 terrorist attack in New York. It is believed that some 3,000 Islamic fighters, the so-called mujahedins, passed through Bosnia during the war to fight alongside Bosniak (Bosnian Muslim) soldiers against Bosnian Serb and Croat forces.

Around 300 of these fighters remained in the country and settled down. Some were found to be involved in criminal activities in Bosnia and abroad.

The vast majority of people who live in Bosnia view mujahedins with suspicion and hostility because of their radical religious and ideological practices.

An additional concern is the presence in Bosnia of tens of thousands of Western soldiers, policemen, diplomats and other officials working for numerous international organisations. All possible targets for terrorists.

News of the embassy closures sparked furious speculation and stirred passions. One ominous sign in recent days has been the appearance in Sarajevo and other towns in the Federation of graffiti supporting Osama bin Laden.

Wild rumours spread rapidly. "I've heard that Osama bin Laden was arrested yesterday in central Bosnia," one Sarajevo woman told friends over the telephone. Another claim that Sarajevo airport had been closed turned out to be false.

A terse advisory from the US consulate urged all Americans in Bosnia to "maintain the highest level of vigilance for the foreseeable future, particularly over the next several days".

Neither of the embassies nor any other American or British

official would provide further explanation for the alarm. As a matter of fact, most American, British and other Western officials in Bosnia-Herzegovina appeared just as puzzled, confused and scared as anyone else.

"We just received a phone call last night and were told that we did not have to come to the office today," said a staff member of the US embassy in Sarajevo on Wednesday. "No explanation was given."

"We are being kept in the dark," complained another official working for an international organisation who was trying to find out whether he too should evacuate his office or leave the country entirely.

The mysterious security threat appeared limited to Bosnia and was not evident elsewhere in the region.

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