

Saudi-American Forum



Special Report

April 16, 2004

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Evacuation Is Ordered for Most U.S. Diplomats in Saudi Arabia

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Friday, April 16, 2004

The United States yesterday ordered the evacuation of most U.S. diplomats and all U.S. family dependents from Saudi Arabia, and "strongly urged" all American citizens to leave because of "credible and specific" intelligence about terrorist attacks planned against U.S. and other Western targets, the State Department announced.

The intelligence included the discovery of truck and pipe bombs and the apprehension of at least two suspects in recent days, U.S. officials said late yesterday. The warning noted that Saudi security forces and heavily armed extremists recently engaged in serious clashes.

Some of the intelligence emerged during Saudi interrogations of the suspects. Saudi security forces are in hot pursuit of other suspected terrorists thought to be involved in the new terrorist plots, the U.S. officials added.

The State Department denied that the threat is directly related to the new tape from al Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden, a Saudi renegade who was stripped of his citizenship in the early 1990s. But the new plots are tied to groups linked with past terrorist activity in the kingdom that has been blamed on bin Laden followers and sympathizers.

The Bush administration offered few specifics. "The threat level has gone up," Secretary of State Colin L. Powell told reporters when he made the surprise announcement after meeting with former Costa Rican president Miguel Angel Rodriguez.

At least 200 Americans are expected to be evacuated immediately. The State Department refused to release specific numbers for security reasons. Only the ambassador and an emergency staff will be left at the Riyadh embassy and at two consulates, in Dhahran and Jeddah, a State Department official said.

The new warning also recommended that all U.S. citizens contemplating travel to the kingdom

defer their plans. Anyone who stays should register with the embassy, it added. Embassy services may be affected or become unavailable because of personnel shortages or security limitations, it said.

Besides diplomatic posts, the housing compounds for foreigners are particularly vulnerable, the warning noted. "American citizens in Saudi Arabia should remain vigilant, particularly in public places associated with the Western community. Terrorists attacked residential housing compounds in the Riyadh area in 2003. Credible information indicates that terrorists continue to target residential compounds in Saudi Arabia, particularly in the Riyadh area, but also compounds throughout the country," the State Department said in a statement.

Despite the drastic action, the Bush administration said Saudi Arabia is gaining ground on the extremist factions responsible for three suicide attacks last May on U.S. residential compounds in Riyadh and for a November attack on another foreign compound, housing mainly Muslims.

Saudi intelligence averted a "catastrophic" suicide attack on Nov. 25 when it discovered an explosives-laden truck intended for a residential compound in Riyadh, said Lou Finton, a State Department spokesman. "We remain fully confident that Saudi authorities are doing all they can to protect their citizens and others in the kingdom against terrorist attacks. There is also a solid level of cooperation between our two governments in combating terrorism in Saudi Arabia and around the world," Finton said.

Another senior State Department official praised Saudi authorities for being aggressive and for having taken important steps since the Riyadh bombings. But he acknowledged that the latest threat indicates that the oil-rich Persian Gulf state "remains a battleground" for terrorism. "As the Saudis act and move to dismantle these networks, the extremists are seeking to reassert themselves," he said.

"In a sense, it's a sign that the Saudis are having an impact. But the networks are not wrapped up, and there continue to be active elements that are a threat. We want to offer them as small a target as possible," the senior official added.

Warnings are issued for a month and are then reviewed.

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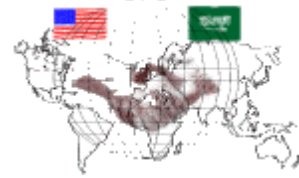
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