

Exhibit 6



Long Before Sept. 11, Bin Laden Aircraft Flew Under the Radar

BY STEPHEN BRAUN AND JUDY PASTERNAK

NOV. 18, 2001 12 AM PT



TIMES STAFF WRITERS

Osama bin Laden built a shadow air force to support his terrorist activities, using Afghanistan's national airline, a surplus U.S. Air Force jet and clandestine charters.

Long before suicide teams crashed hijacked airliners into the World Trade Center and the Pentagon on Sept. 11, sympathetic foreign officials and wealthy supporters gave Bin Laden access to planes to help him forge, arm and transport his terrorist network.

Interviews with more than 50 U.S. diplomatic and security aides, law enforcement agents, former Afghan civil air officials, pilots and aviation executives provide a wealth of new details about how Bin Laden cobbled together an unconventional air capability.

Through an operative, he bought and refurbished the Air Force passenger jet in 1992 and had it transported to Sudan, where he was then based. He shipped men and materiel on Afghanistan's Ariana Airways after the Taliban took control of the country in 1996. And when international sanctions hobbled the airline last year, he turned to covert charters to keep his terrorist network airborne.

ADVERTISEMENT



In recent weeks, U.S. bombers pounded a western Afghanistan airfield where four Ariana airliners were believed to be stored. The attack was an attempt to deny Bin Laden mobility and prevent his escape from Afghanistan.

U.S. officials expressed concern that he might have other aircraft assets concealed in the country. Secretary of Defense Donald H. Rumsfeld said Bin Laden might try to flee aboard a “well-hidden helicopter.” A former Afghan civil air official said Taliban leaders had given Bin Laden regular access to a Russian-made MI-17 helicopter in recent years.

With the Taliban’s blessing, Bin Laden effectively had hijacked Ariana, the national civilian airline of Afghanistan. For four years, according to former U.S. aides and exiled Afghan officials, Ariana’s passenger and charter flights ferried Islamic militants, arms, cash and opium through the United Arab Emirates and Pakistan. Members of Bin Laden’s Al Qaeda terrorist network were provided false Ariana identification that gave them free run of airports in the Middle East.

“One airline was servicing Afghanistan at the time, and that was Ariana,” said Steve Simon, a former senior director for transnational threats at the National Security Council. “Al Qaeda moved drugs out, money in and people around on Ariana.”

Taliban authorities also opened the country’s airstrips to high-ranking Persian Gulf state officials who routinely flew in for lavish hunting parties. Sometimes joined by Bin Laden and Taliban leaders, the dignitaries, who included several high-ranking officials from Saudi Arabia and the Emirates--left behind money, vehicles and equipment with their hosts, according to U.S. and Afghan accounts.

In buying and renovating the Air Force jet, Bin Laden and Al Qaeda easily evaded rules governing the sale of U.S. planes.

The jet, overhauled at Van Nuys Airport in 1992, later was used to ferry Al Qaeda commanders to East Africa, where they trained Somali tribesmen for attacks on U.S. peacekeeping forces. It later crashed on a runway in Sudan.

Bin Laden's secret purchase capitalized on lax government oversight and the unwitting aid of Americans who helped disguise the plane as a civilian jet.

The FBI is reexamining the episode. Concerned that other terrorists may have attempted to buy planes, investigators have been looking at several unusual attempts earlier this year to obtain commercial aircraft, though they have yet to find any credible links to terrorists.

"Our sensitivities are so much more finely tuned now," explained Clive G. Medland, a vice president of a New York aviation firm whose executives were questioned by the FBI about an attempt by three Pakistanis to lease a transport jet earlier this year. "Everyone's on guard."

An Eager Student Flies the T-39

In mid-December 1992, John Lowrey, a veteran pilot operating out of a small airfield in Lancaster, took a client up in a surplus Air Force T-39A jet.

Lowrey's new student was Essam al Ridi, an Egyptian emigre who showed up in a crisp Northwest Airlinck pilot's uniform. Ridi told Lowrey he was eager to learn to fly the T-39A because he had just bought a similar jet and planned to fly it for a family in Cairo.

The T-39s, military versions of the twin-engine Sabreliner built by North American Rockwell, had been used by the Air Force since the late 1950s to transport generals and VIPs. The jet Ridi purchased was being overhauled at Van Nuys airport, so Lowrey trained the Egyptian in a borrowed T-39.

Ridi bought the plane from a Southern California broker, using funds from Al Qaeda to pay for the aircraft and the repairs. Ridi told Lowrey and Americans working on the T-39 that he planned to pilot the craft for wealthy Egyptians.

Ridi was a fast learner. Just weeks after he finished training, he flew the plane from Van Nuys to Texas. He then set out in January 1993--not for Cairo, but to the Sudanese capital of Khartoum. There, in a secluded guest house, he turned over the plane's keys to its real owner, Bin Laden, at a dinner attended by men armed with AK47s, according to Ridi's testimony in a recent federal trial.

Bin Laden was familiar with airplanes. His father, Sheik Mohammad bin Laden, was the first Saudi permitted by King Faisal to buy his own plane--a twin-engine Beechcraft; he died in a jet crash in September 1967.

When Bin Laden went to Afghanistan to fight the Soviet invaders in the 1980s, he paid for charter jets to fly in arms for the moujahedeen and for construction and demolition equipment. After he was forced to move his budding Al Qaeda organization to Sudan in 1991, he again used charter flights to move troops and materiel.

According to Ridi, Bin Laden wanted his own T-39 to fly U.S.-built, shoulder-fired Stinger missiles from Pakistan to Sudan. Ridi provided his account of the T-39 sale in February, during testimony as a federal witness in the trial of four Al Qaeda terrorists convicted in the 1998 bombings of U.S. embassies in Kenya and Tanzania.

Air Force officials said they were amazed when they learned that one of their surplus jets ended up in Bin Laden's hands. Officials at the U.S. Air Force Museum at Wright-Patterson Air Force Base in Fairborn, Ohio--the last government facility to own the T-39--said they will tighten monitoring of future sales and trades.

"I'm sure we're going to be changing our way of doing business," museum spokesman Christopher McGee said.

The museum already had toughened its safeguards on aircraft transactions in 1997, requiring traders to undergo a “security control check” and win a clearance certificate by the Defense Logistics Agency. The rules also required the new owners to notify future buyers that they would have to obtain an export license to fly the plane out of the country.

In fact, the museum was scrupulous in its 1989 trade of the T-39 to a California aircraft broker who later sold the jet to Ridi. McGee said the transaction was cleared with an assistant secretary of the Air Force. In a Jan. 12, 1990, deal, broker Ascher Ward was to receive six T-39s in exchange for a Rapide DH-89A aircraft. The T-39s were delivered to Ward in March 1990.

Ward sold one of the craft to Ridi in 1992. Ridi later testified that he paid \$210,000--money relayed to him by one of Bin Laden’s aides--but Ward said he received less than \$100,000.

Government officials and aviation workers involved in Bin Laden’s secret purchase of the T-39 say that FBI agents recently have interviewed them and scanned their records. So far, authorities have found no evidence that Ridi’s purchase of the T-39 violated U.S. law.

“On an unprecedented scale, we are examining and reexamining a multitude of areas; looking for suspicious patterns or activities,” FBI Assistant Director John Collingwood said. “Even legitimate prior activities that can be predictive are being examined.”

Ridi was able to evade the informal honor system that governs aircraft sales in the U.S.

“The system just isn’t built to check out every sale of an aircraft,” said Bill Gardner, president of the Meridian Aerospace Group, a major commercial jet broker in Winston-Salem, N.C. “There’s really not much preventing

somebody from buying a big old jet transport and flying it into anything they want to take out.”

The FAA typically registers military aircraft purchased for civil use as “experimental” until they comply with FAA requirements for airworthiness, agency spokesman Paul Turk said. Under that status, planes cannot be used to haul cargo or passengers for hire. Tom Poborezny, who heads the Experimental Aircraft Assn., said that under international air policy, such experimental aircraft also cannot be flown out of the U.S. without obtaining diplomatic clearances to land at foreign airports.

Several Americans who saw Bin Laden’s T-39 in Van Nuys said it was being refitted as a civilian craft. Roy Silva, who installed new radios in the cockpit, recalled that before the T-39 was outfitted with new leather seats and repainted, the word “experimental” was visible inside the jet’s door.

Several weeks later, the insignia was painted over and “Sabreliner” was stitched into the bulkhead. Painting out the word “experimental” for a plane designated as that status is an FAA violation. But “it’s not exactly a capital crime,” Turk said. “There is no task force out there looking for people who obscure the markings, but if you were caught, you’d be told to fix it or else.”

According to Barrie Towey, an editor at Air-Britain News, a British plane spotter saw the T-39 in Luton, England, on Jan. 16, 1993. Ridi flew the T-39 from Fort Worth to Sault Ste. Marie and Frobisher Bay, Canada; Iceland; Rome and Cairo before landing in Khartoum.

There, he was invited to dinner with Bin Laden and his terrorist commanders. The next day, Bin Laden offered Ridi a job as his personal pilot. The Egyptian turned him down after he learned his pay would be only \$1,200 a month.

In late 1993, Ridi later testified, he flew the T-39 to Nairobi, Kenya, dropping off five Al Qaeda commanders. They were on their way to Somalia to stir up tribal insurgents against U.S. peacekeeping troops there. Another federal witness testified that one of the passengers was Mohammed Atef, Bin Laden's senior commander who reportedly was killed in an airstrike last week.

The T-39's third flight was its last. Returning to Khartoum in 1995, Ridi found the jet sagging in disuse, its tires melted in the desert heat, vents stuffed with sand. He overhauled the engine and took it for a test run, but the jet skidded, crashing into a dune. Panicked, Ridi fled.

A high-ranking federal official said that six years later Bin Laden's jet still is in Khartoum, disabled and landlocked.

Ridi, who has disappeared into the federal witness protection program, still is listed as the plane's owner in FAA files.

Overdue, 727 Returns With Surprise Cargo

In October 1996, a month after the Islamic militant Taliban seized control of Afghanistan, Ariana officials in the capital of Kabul grew alarmed about a missing Boeing 727 cargo plane.

The jet had been chartered for a round trip from Jalalabad to Khartoum by two Sudanese diplomats. It was to fly to the UAE, then on to Khartoum carrying a load of fruit and rugs. It was to return a few days later with a humanitarian cargo of food and medicine.

It took a week before the 727 returned. When the weary flight crew showed up in Ariana's home office in Kabul, according to former Afghan civil air officials familiar with the incident, they offered a strange tale.

In Khartoum, the crew waited three days in a hotel until Sudanese authorities were ready to load the plane. Back at the airport, they were stunned to find no cargo but 90 passengers waiting to board. The Sudanese had installed 100 seats in the 727, then herded the passengers aboard--women veiled in burkas, men in desert robes, excited children. No travel documents were checked.

Flying into Jalalabad just after midnight, the passengers were greeted by a dusty convoy of jeeps, vans and trucks. Many of the drivers carried weapons. Within minutes, the passengers piled into the vehicles, then disappeared into the desert night.

According to the crew, the Arab passengers and their Afghan welcomers worked for Bin Laden.

The ease with which Bin Laden's operatives boarded the 727 was soon replicated on a daily basis. Bin Laden and his Taliban hosts commandeered the 35-year-old national air company as their private charter service.

Bin Laden himself had flown out of Khartoum that May. He disappeared into Afghanistan, making his way first to Jalalabad, then to Kandahar, the mountainous southern region home to Taliban leader Mullah Mohammed Omar and the staging ground for jihad, or holy war, training camps.

Ariana Airlines became a "key node in Al Qaeda's infrastructure," a former NSC official said. "The network used Ariana to move everything that was useful--money, personnel and materiel."

Schedules previously tightly hewed to by Ariana pilots suddenly collapsed. Passenger routes to Paris and Beijing shriveled, replaced by an explosion of cargo runs. Many of the freight shipments flew in and out of Pakistan and UAE.

“The planes would come back from the UAE loaded with weapons,” said Julie Sirrs, an Afghanistan specialist at the U.S. Defense Intelligence Agency during the Clinton administration. “It was mostly Soviet weapons, small arms-- Kalashnikovs [rifles] and RPG-7s [shoulder-fired antitank rocket launchers].”

Ariana’s schedule became “something of a hit-and-miss proposition,” said Simon, the former NSC official who now is assistant director of the International Institute for Strategic Studies in London. “They would take off 30 minutes before schedule. They canceled flights. It gave them the flexibility they needed” to move illicit cargo.

U.S. Knew of Al Qaeda Travels

U.S. security officials were aware that Al Qaeda terrorists flew on Ariana “to the UAE and other points in the [Persian] Gulf,” Simon added.

According to Sirrs, one Yemeni Al Qaeda operative held prisoner in northern Afghanistan by the Northern Alliance described flying from Yemen to Afghanistan on Ariana planes in 1997 and 1998.

Some went disguised as Ariana employees. According to an Afghan civil air expert familiar with Ariana’s operations, Taliban officials set up a false document mill in 1997 “right at the airport” in Kabul. The station churned out reams of phony documents, allowing Islamic militants to travel out of the country posing as Ariana pilots, flight attendants, mechanics and clerks.

“They would give the Talib’s and Bin Laden’s people Ariana ID cards,” the Afghan air expert said. “So you would have planes going out with 20 mechanics on board. Do you think all those people were mechanics? That made them crew members. They could get into any airport they wanted to.”

A frequent stop was Sharjah, one of the Emirates. Sharjah International Airport, former U.S. and Afghan officials said, became a hub for drug and arms smuggling by Al Qaeda. The emirate, 20 miles from Dubai, is run by a fundamentalist Islamic regime. Sharjah's airport is studded with numerous "fly-by-night" cargo operations willing to take on any comers, U.S. analysts said. Some allegedly flew on contracts for Al Qaeda.

The terrorists often relied on an Ariana representative stationed at the Sharjah airport. The man was a Taliban-appointed Al Qaeda operative, according to the Afghan air expert. Since the U.S. began military operations, the man has not been seen by the Afghan's Emirate contacts.

An Emirate spokesman insisted that security at UAE airports is tight. "All our airports are under strict procedures," said Abdullah Alsadoosi, a UAE diplomat in Washington. "I don't think smuggling can go through that."

But a U.S. official said Ariana planes were used to deliver cash from the Emirates to Al Qaeda operatives in Pakistan. And officials also say Ariana planes shipped out large quantities of drugs.

In August 1996, while Afghanistan still was divided among rival factions, one attempt by the Taliban to ship opium on an Ariana flight to the UAE was halted by Ahmed Shah Masoud, the Northern Alliance leader who was assassinated, presumably by Taliban or Al Qaeda operatives, just days before the Sept. 11 attacks in the U.S.

According to the former Afghan air expert, Masoud learned that Taliban officials had contracted with Ariana for a one-way charter from Jalalabad to Sharjah. Taliban officials told the airline the cargo was wood bound for construction sites in the UAE. Suspicious, Masoud led an armed band onto the Boeing 727 at the Jalalabad airport and examined the timber. Inside hollow logs, Masoud's men found bags of opium.

Those familiar with Ariana's growing abuse by Al Qaeda and the Taliban say there also are reports suggesting that the airline might have been used to train Islamic militants as pilots. According to Afghan sources, Taliban officials ordered Ariana executives in 1997 to train two of their men as Boeing 727 pilots.

The men, Afghan air force pilots experienced only in flying Russian jets, were sent to a Jordanian Airways flight school that Ariana used to train its own civilian pilots. According to the Afghan aviation expert, the two Taliban pilots were "washouts," unable to master the 727's panel and speak English--the international language of pilots.

In March 1998, when an Ariana Boeing 727 crashed into a mountain near Kabul killing 45 people, the airliner reportedly was flown by two Taliban pilots, the Afghan expert said.

A security specialist who spent time in Afghanistan also said there were reports that the Taliban tried to recruit pilots for \$4,000 to \$5,000 a month, tax-free, in the northern region near Uzbekistan. The payments, the specialist said, reportedly were offered by Al Qaeda.

According to a former NSC official, Ariana's domination by Al Qaeda and the Taliban was a key basis for the United Nations' decision in 2000 to impose sanctions on the Taliban.

When U.S. officials approached the U.N. about imposing sanctions, they and Russian officials detailed Ariana's cover role "so people could understand why this was needed," the former NSC aide said.

After Ariana's foreign flights were shut down, Ariana charter flights kept moving Al Qaeda cargoes and agents, former U.S. and Afghan officials said. Islamic militants often turned to a Lebanese-run charter service flying out of Sharjah.

According to the Afghan aviation expert, the cargo firm provided mid-size Russian Antonov cargo jets for charter runs “when they couldn’t fly on Ariana.”

For years, Persian Gulf state elites hunted rare birds of prey, houbara bustards, in the bleak hills surrounding Kandahar. In the late 1990s, according to former U.S. and Afghan officials, a number of prominent Persian Gulf state officials and businessmen flew into Kandahar on state and private jets for secret hunting expeditions.

For days at a time, the hunters would roam the hills, releasing falcons trained to catch the bustards. Some satisfied hunters heaped donations on their Taliban hosts, officials said--and on Al Qaeda leaders who occasionally joined them.

Among the reported visitors were high-ranking UAE and Saudi government ministers. According to U.S. and former Afghan civil air officials, the hunters included Prince Turki al Faisal, son of the late Saudi King Faisal. He headed that nation’s intelligence service until late August, maintaining close ties with Bin Laden and the Taliban. Another visitor, officials said, was Sheik Mohammed ibn Rashid al Maktum, the Dubai crown prince and Emirates defense minister.

Persian Gulf state officials cast doubt on the reports. “People go hunting in Pakistan. They don’t go to Afghanistan,” said Adel al-Jubeir, foreign policy advisor to Saudi Crown Prince Abdullah. Similarly, the UAE’s Alsadoosi said he did “not recall” any Afghan hunting trips made by Sheik Mohammed.

Plenty of Supplies Left After Visits

U.S. security sources and former Afghan officials said they did not know what transpired during the visits by the two ministers.

But on other occasions, Bin Laden and Omar mingled with the hunters. Former intelligence official Sirrs said a Taliban defector who claimed he was a hunting camp guard described “rich Saudis and top Taliban officials there.” The man also said Bin Laden and Omar went off to fish together. An Afghan source said the two militant leaders often fished at a dam west of Kandahar.

Departing, the wealthy visitors often left behind late-model jeeps, trucks and supplies. “That’s one way the Taliban got their equipment,” said Mohammed Eshaq, who served as Afghanistan’s deputy minister of civil aviation from 1992 to 1994. A security specialist with experience in Afghanistan said that late-model pickups left by the sheiks “revolutionized” the Taliban’s troop transport.

“The Taliban could do these hit and runs,” the specialist said. “These are the pickup trucks you see Taliban soldiers driving around in on the news.”

The dignitaries’ outbound jets, former U.S. and Afghan officials suspect, may also have smuggled out Al Qaeda and Taliban cargo.

“Who knows what came and went on those planes?” Sirrs said.

U.S. officials are more certain of the fate of Ariana Airways’ fleet of four Boeing 727s.

As U.S. bombers took to the skies over Afghanistan in recent weeks, Taliban officials reportedly withdrew the jets to hangars at an airfield near the city of Herat. The move provided no shelter. U.S. bombers struck at the Herat field repeatedly in search of “legitimate targets,” Navy Adm. John D. Stufflebeem said.

Former Afghan civil air officials said Ariana’s fleet no longer exists.

“The [Herat] airport,” exulted a former Afghan civil air official, “is now flattened.”

*

Times staff writers Mark Fineman and John Hendren in Washington, Davan Maharaj in Nairobi, Caitlin Liu and Greg Krikorian in Los Angeles and researchers John Beckham, Janet Lundblad and Robert Patrick contributed to this report.

Around the Web

Ads by Revcontent



America's First Ladies Were Just Ranked (Guess Who's #1)

MONEYWISE.COM



Scientists: Brain Scan Uncovers the Real Root Cause of Tinnitus (Ear Ringing)

HEALTHY CARE WELLBEING



Historians Just Ranked All U.S. Presidents (#1 is Unexpected)

MONEYWISE.COM



The Presidents Were Just Ranked (Guess Who's #1)

MONEYWISE.COM



Homeowners Born Before 1985 Get \$3,708 Benefit in March (You Must Request It)

FINANCE DAILY



New Toenail Clippers Are a Must-have for Seniors in California

CLIPPERPRO

SUBSCRIBERS ARE READING >

FOR SUBSCRIBERS

How a man's death in Beverly Hills exposed a sprawling Hollywood drug delivery business

FOR SUBSCRIBERS

So you want to build an ADU in California? Here's what you need to know

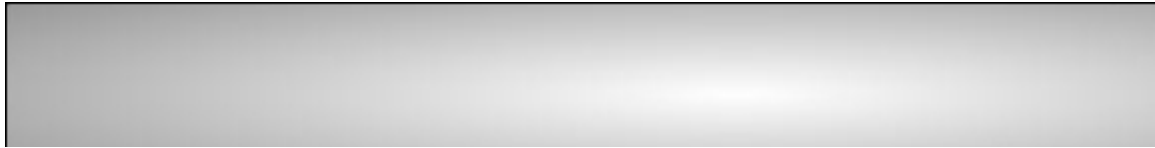
FOR SUBSCRIBERS

'The One' mega-mansion is up for auction. Whoever buys it may soon have a mega-headache

'It's all from Bunnies': Inside the 'vicious' feud tearing Playboy alumni apart

Putin's fears of a unified, stronger Europe are fast becoming a self-fulfilling prophecy

ADVERTISEMENT



Los Angeles Times

A **California Times** Publication

[Subscribe for unlimited access](#)

Follow Us



[eNewspaper](#)

[Crossword](#)

[About/Contact](#)

Coupons

Find/Post Jobs

Place an Ad

Media Kit: Why the
L. A. Times?

Bestcovery

Sudoku

Obituaries

Recipes

L.A. Times Store

Wine Club

For the Record

L.A. Times Careers

Manage Subscription

Reprints and
Permissions

Site Map

Copyright © 2022, Los Angeles Times | [Terms of Service](#) | [Privacy Policy](#) | [CA Notice of Collection](#) | [Do Not Sell My Personal Information](#)