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CIVIL LIBERTIES GROUP CRIES FOUL OVER EU ANTI-TERRORISM PLANS

March 25, 2004 The EUobserver reported: 'Statewatch, a civil liberties watchdog has raised concerns over anti-terrorism plans on the table of EU leaders today, saying that half of the proposals under consideration "bear little or no relations to tackling terrorist attacks like those in Spain".

EU leaders will discuss and agree a declaration to combat terrorism, which emerged after an extraordinary meeting of EU interior ministers last Friday. However, according to the UK-based organization, a substantial number of the proposals on the table "have little or nothing to do with tackling terrorism" as they deal with crime and surveillance. Statewatch also sounded alarm bells on proposals for data retention and storage.

"A number of the proposals would introduce the wholesale surveillance of everyone in Europe and could potentially be used for social and political control", it said. These proposals include the introduction of biometric information, such as fingerprints, in passports and residents= permits for non EU citizens, tracking all air travel in and out and within the EU, and the logging of emails, mobile phones and phone calls.

"Under the guise of tackling terrorism the EU is planning to bring in a swathe of measures to do with crime and the surveillance of the whole population. After the dreadful loss of life and injuries in Madrid we need a response that unites Europe rather than divides it", Statewatch editor Tony Bunyan said.

Irish Justice Minister Michael McDowell dismissed claims last week that civil liberties will be infringed upon saying it was a "false dichotomy" and that civil liberties and anti-terrorist measures were two sides of the same coin. "You can=t have civil liberties at the expense of life and limb", he said last Friday.

At their meeting today, EU leaders are expected to appoint a person who would co-ordinate the EU's fight on terror, pledge to improve intelligence sharing and implement anti-terror laws which were agreed after the 11 September attacks in New York.'

U.S. WARNS AMERICANS AGAINST VISITING ISRAEL

March 24, 2004 Haaretz.com reported: 'The United States on Wednesday warned its citizens in Gaza to leave and advised against travel to Israel, the West Bank or Gaza, following Monday's assassination of Sheikh Ahmed Yassin.

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs on Wednesday ordered the closure of diplomatic missions in Qatar and Mauritania for fear of terror attacks. The missions will remain closed throughout the holiday. Foreign Ministry spokesman Yonatan Peled said the families were brought home a week before a planned home leave for the Jewish holiday of Passover.

He said there were no direct threats on the two small missions in the Arab world, but for "security reasons" the families were brought home. The missions are small, and there are only about two or three families in each one, Peled said.

The State Department in a statement said "In the aftermath of the killing of Hamas leader Sheikh Ahmed Yassin, a Hamas spokesman has threatened revenge against Israel and U.S. interests."

Hamas had released a statement shortly after the assassination on Monday, in which it directly threatened the U.S. for the first time in the group=s history. "The Zionists didn't carry out their operation without the consent of the terrorist American administration, and it must bear responsibility for this crime," the statement said.

President George W. Bush told reporters on Tuesday that these threats by Hamas were being taken seriously. "I'm worried about terrorist groups targeting America," Bush said when asked about the threat posed by Hamas. "Whether it be an Hamas threat, or an al Qaeda threat, we take them very seriously in this administration."

The State Department also renewed a previous warning about the possibility of attacks by Osama bin Laden's al Qaeda network...'

EU TO FORGE OWN POLICY ON MIDDLE EAST

March 22, 2004 The EUObserver reported: 'Despite calls for a common EU-US approach to the Middle East, the Union will press ahead with its own "distinct approach", according to an internal policy paper. The paper, produced by the Irish Presidency B which currently heads the EU B sets out 11 policy goals for greater engagement with the Middle East. Chief among them is the creation of a "common zone of peace, prosperity and progress".

The EU however is concerned that its own policies and what=s left of the Arab-Israeli peace process may be overtaken



by a US policy heavily focused on democratic reforms. The baggage brought to the table by the US is also a concern.

The US has proposed a series of joint declarations on reform of the Middle East to take place at this summer=s EU-US, NATO and G8 summits. But the EU, faced with calls from the region for more consultation, is opting to "continue to pursue its own distinct strategy". In recent months the EU and US have held a series of talks aimed at agreeing on a common approach. They appear to have achieved few results on the most contentious issues, however.

The EU now says it will forge a "complimentary but distinct" approach, developing what it calls "a sense of shared ownership" of the plan. "There is a view in the region that its perspectives have not been fully taken into account in the development of the current initiatives", says the document.

Diplomats say the outcome of the meeting of the Arab League at the end of this month will be a major factor in determining the EU=s actions. However there is also some concern about the sidelining of the Middle East Peace Process.

"Progress on the resolution of the middle east conflict cannot be a precondition for confronting the urgent reform challenges facing the countries in the region nor vice versa", says the document. The EU is expected to finalize its policy at June=s meeting of EU leaders.'

AL QAIDA COULD ROUND UP 300 VESSELS

March 22, 2004 The Middle East Newline reported: 'Al Qaida has acquired a fleet for attacks on Western shipping, particularly in the Persian Gulf.

A report said Al Qaida's sabotage fleet ranges from 15 to 300 vessels. Al Qaida has already launched two suicide strikes in the Persian Gulf against both the USS Cole and the French supertanker Limbaugh.

"For overworked maritime security officials, it is no longer a question of 'if,' but rather 'when' and 'where,'" the report, entitled "Al Qaida and Maritime Terrorism," said. "The grim reality is that, with a global maritime fleet of 120,000 vessels, any solution for inspection and search is going to be haphazard at best."

Authored by John Daly, an adjunct scholar at the Washington-based Middle East Institute, the report said the threat of an Al Qaida attack could be diminished by the capture of the group's maritime specialist. The report identified him as Abdul Rahim Mohammed Abd Al Nasheri, also know as Mulla Ahmad Belal, the mastermind of the USS Cole attack in October 2000. Al Nasheri had been promoted within Al Qaida to take over operational planning for future attacks.'

EU COULD BACK WTO MEMBERSHIP FOR ALL MIDDLE EAST

March 22, 2004 The EUObserver reported: 'The European Union could back World Trade Organization membership for all countries of the Middle East. An internal policy document obtained by this news-site, lists eleven policy objectives which may be included in an overall EU strategy.

One of the possible objectives says, "The EU will promote WTO membership for countries in the region" The aim is part of an overarching policy on the Middle East formulated by the current EU Presidency. The move would see countries such as Algeria, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Iraq, Libya, Iran and Syria become fully paid-up members of the international trade body.

The EU also aims at improving the business, modernization and regulatory environment in the region as well as liberalizing the import and export markets. The move would help to bring countries like Iran and Libya further into the international community. In return, the EU would seek help creating a region of peace and stability including democratic and human rights reforms.'

EARTH FACES SIXTH MASS EXTINCTION

March 18, 2004 NewScientist.com reported: 'The Earth may be on the brink of a sixth mass extinction on a par with the five others that have punctuated its history, suggests the strongest evidence yet. Butterflies in Britain are going extinct at an even greater rate than birds, according to the most comprehensive study ever of butterflies, birds, and plants.

There is growing concern over the rate at which species of plants and animals are disappearing around the world. But until now the evidence for such extinctions has mainly come from studies of birds. "The doubters could always turn around and say that there's something peculiar about birds that makes them susceptible to the impact of man on the environment," says Jeremy Greenwood of the British Trust for Ornithology in Norfolk, and one of the research team.

Now there is concrete evidence that insects - which account for more than half the described species on Earth, are disappearing faster than birds.

"If we can extrapolate that pattern of the British butterflies to other British insects, and indeed to invertebrates across the planet, we are obviously looking at a very serious bio-diversity crisis," says team member Mark Telfer of the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds in Bedfordshire, UK...'