



NO SECTION

Terror group may have received local funds // Some Minnesota Somalis thought Al-Itihaad was a charity

By Greg Gordon, Joy Powell, Kimberly Hayes Taylor

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Federal investigators believe that some metro-area Somalis, who have donated heavily to their war-torn homeland in recent years, also sent a significant amount of money to a group linked to Osama bin Laden.

The Somalia-based Islamic group Al-Itihaad al-Islamiya operates a fund-raising arm in the metropolitan area which has raised money from Somalis, according to a federal law enforcement official and local Somalis.

Some Somalis said that those who contributed in Minnesota thought the group was a charity. President Bush, however, froze assets of Al-Itihaad and 26 other people and organizations because of links to Bin Laden or his terrorist organization Al-Qaida, and barred future donations to them.

One law enforcement official said investigators suspect that a significant amount of money from the Minnesota Somalis' donations has gone to Al-Itihaad. The official was not specific about the amount.

A confidential informant also told U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service investigators in 1999 that several Al-Itihaad members were in the metro area, according to a federal investigative memo obtained by the Star Tribune. It is not clear what investigators did with the information.

The law enforcement official said that since the terror attacks on the Pentagon and World Trade Center, concern about the group has risen. Al-Itihaad followers, including some from Toronto, held a social event in the Twin Cities within the last year to raise money, the official said.

Mohamed Wardere, a Twin Cities Somali leader, said the FBI visited the Shafi mosque and Wardere's office at the nearby Somali Community of America Center in the Cedar-

Riverside area five days after the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks to ask about Al-Itihaad.

Wardere and Sheik Abdirahman Ahmad, a prayer leader at the mosque, said Somalis should contact federal authorities if they know of anyone collecting money for Al-Itihaad or planning terrorist activities.

"It's bad on our community," Wardere said. "If we find that somebody is doing that in our community, we won't hide them."

Law enforcement officials gave no indication that they consider Al-Itihaad associates in the Twin Cities to be part of an active terrorist cell poised to strike. Charlie Weaver, Minnesota public safety commissioner, on Friday repeated his message that there is no "credible threat" of terrorism in the state.

Tom Heffelfinger, U.S. attorney for Minnesota, said he could not comment on the federal investigation. In interviews last week, some Twin Cities Somalis expressed surprise to learn of Al-Itihaad's alleged ties to Bin Laden. Some Somalis said they believed Al-Itihaad to be a charity, while others said they knew of the group's violent past. Minnesota is home to 5,500 Somalis, the U.S. Census Bureau says, though some estimates have put the population at 50,000.

Last November, the Star Tribune reported that Minnesota Somalis wired more than \$75 million in donations to East Africa in recent years, mainly to impoverished relatives. Small sums for guns and clan-based militias also were sent back home during conflicts, the paper reported. David Shinn, the former U.S. ambassador to Ethiopia who was also the State Department's director of East African Affairs during the Clinton administration, said the overwhelming majority of Somalis in the United States are upstanding citizens.

"To the extent that anything is happening that shouldn't be going on," he said, "I'm absolutely certain that it impacts only a tiny, tiny number of all the Somalis in the country."

Imam Hassan Mahamud, a Somali prayer leader at Al-Taqwa mosque in St. Paul, said he is aware that Al-Itihaad has operated in the metro area but doesn't know its members or how money is collected. He said no funds had been donated to Al-Itihaad at his mosque. Mahamud said Al-Itihaad, like other Somali Islamic organizations, helps the poor, those in debt, people who seek educational help or travelers.

"I don't know how they came to the conclusion of blocking the funding to these organizations," he said. "As far as I know, Somali Islamic organizations - because of the 10

years of civil war - have been working to help their people wherever they have moved in the world."

Amal Yusuf, who runs the Somalian Women's Association in Minneapolis, said that as a girl growing up in Somalia, she heard about Al-Itihaad's charity. She said she also knew it had sponsored violence against Ethiopians.

Just recently, Yusuf said, she learned that Al-Itihaad is a violent group that has oppressed women and recruited followers by distorting the religion. Yusuf, who moved to the United States in 1995, said she knows women who are loyal to Al-Itihaad. She said she now believes the group targets the poor and emotionally vulnerable, including one woman whose husband was killed in warfare with Ethiopians.

Some women have been shown pictures of rape and death to recruit them, Yusuf said. Somalis in Minnesota have contributed to Al-Itihaad, including some who pledged their jewelry because they didn't have cash, she said.

"Even though they are powerful, they have many agendas that they don't tell people," she said. "Their recruitment strategy is very successful and very manipulative of people's minds."

Federal investigators believe the Al-Qaida terrorists have used a number of Muslim charities to provide cover, raise money and help recruit new members. Al-Itihaad's militant wing operates from camps near the Ethiopian border. The Ethiopian government has accused it of bombing two Ethiopian hotels and a restaurant, as well as attempting to assassinate a cabinet minister.

The group's nonmilitant branch has sought political influence inside Somalia, which still lacks a strong central government. Al-Itihaad has opened schools, set up courts of sharia, or Islamic law, provided social services and sought to unite warring clans behind their common Islamic faith, according to U.S. experts on East Africa. In a follow-up to the Star Tribune article, the flow of terrorist money from Minnesota was first mentioned briefly in a Newsweek article last February. Somalis in Minnesota offered starkly different views on Al-Itihaad and its alleged links to Bin Laden.

Osman Sahardeed, assistant executive director of the Somali Community of Minnesota, said he knew nothing of the group's presence in Minnesota but had heard of the group as a charity back in Somalia. Abdisalan Hussein, a local Somali interpreter, said Al-Itihaad members are known as fanatics. He said he believes that the Sept. 11 suicide attacks will convince Somalis not to give the group money.

One Twin Cities Somali leader said that lately he has questioned Al-Itihaad's true mission. Mohammed Essa said he knew no details about donations or whether money given in mosques made its way to the group. If people gave, they probably thought it was for charity, he added. "We are giving the money for a charity when they said it was for a charity," said Essa, executive director of the Minnesota Somali Community, which assists immigrants in finding jobs and housing.

Now, because of the government scrutiny of Al-Itihaad, he and other Somalis want to know exactly how their donations are used, Essa said. "Everybody is wondering what is going on, where the money is going," he said

- The reporters can be reached at ggordon@mcclatchydc.com, jpowell@startribune.com and ktaylor@startribune.com. At a glance: -

Al-Itihaad al-Islamiya is an Islamic fundamentalist group formed in Somalia in 1991. It has a history of violence - and charity. - It has taken credit for terrorist strikes that killed several people in Ethiopia in the mid-1990s. It also has fought with Ethiopian troops and a Somalian clan. -

Another branch of the group has built schools, hospitals and fed the poor. It also operates businesses. -

On Sept. 24, the Bush administration alleged that the group is linked to Osama bin Laden or his Al-Qaida network. Source: Star Tribune research



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