



## INTERNATIONAL CENTRE FOR POLITICAL VIOLENCE AND TERRORISM RESEARCH

A Centre of the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies

### Report on the Attempted Bombing of Northwest Airlines Flight 253 “Christmas Day Plot”

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#### The Incident



**Figure 1 File Photograph of Delta/Northwest Flight 253**  
(Photo Credit: Associated Press)

On 25 December 2009, Delta/Northwest Airlines Flight 253, with 278 passengers on board, was starting its descent to Detroit when a man tried to ignite an explosive in what is clearly an attempted act of terrorism.<sup>1</sup> The plane was an Airbus 330 which took off from Nigeria and had a stopover in Amsterdam en route to the United States.

Passengers reported hearing a “pop” and seeing a “burst of flames” coming from a center seat where the suspect, Nigerian national Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab, is at.<sup>2</sup> It took another passenger to tackle the suspect and help put out the fire. The suspect was overpowered, handcuffed and taken to the front of the plane, a passenger said that his pants have been cut off and his legs had burns. The whole incident happened very fast in

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<sup>1</sup> “Passenger tackles suspected plane bomber”, Philippine Daily Inquirer, 26 December 2009, <http://newsinfo.inquirer.net/inquirerheadlines/nation/view/20091226-244101/Passenger-tackles-suspected-plane-bomber>

<sup>2</sup> Ibid

a relatively short period of time. The plane landed safely in Detroit about 10 or 20 minutes after the failed attack.<sup>3</sup>

## Tactics

Passengers of Flight 253 reported that prior to the incident, they saw Abdulmutallab make his way to the toilet and then come out a few minutes later with a pillow held over his stomach and a syringe in his hand. The suspect then injected the syringe into his stomach area and flames ensued. Some passengers reported seeing the suspect's trouser leg and inner wall of the aircraft on fire.<sup>4</sup>

There were speculations that the explosives used were a combination of a powder and liquid which failed to detonate. Abdulmutallab told authorities that he used a syringe to mix chemicals with explosive powder taped to his leg.<sup>5</sup> It was confirmed that Abdulmutallab had the explosives sewn into his underwear.<sup>6</sup> A news source reported that a preliminary analysis from the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) revealed the presence of a high explosive known as PETN or pentaerythritol trinitrate.<sup>7</sup> FBI agents also recovered remnants of a syringe near Abdulmutallab's seat.<sup>8</sup>

It is possible that the syringe was used by Abdulmutallab as an electrical detonator, although it is also likely that it was a liquid detonator as the syringe could be filled a concentrated form of acid.<sup>9</sup> If the latter was the case, it would have been hard for the usual airport security measures to detect it. One expert said that even more advanced security measures such as "machines that sniff passengers for explosives or analyze swabs of their belongings, might not have spotted the device".<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> "Passenger tackles suspected plane bomber", Philippine Daily Inquirer, 26 December 2009, <http://newsinfo.inquirer.net/inquirerheadlines/nation/view/20091226-244101/Passenger-tackles-suspected-plane-bomber>

<sup>4</sup> "Why was he ever allowed to fly? Syringe bomber had been barred from Britain, was on a terror list and even his father had warned U.S.", The Daily Mail, 27 December 2009, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-1238574/Aircraft-passengers-face-heightened-security-measures-emerges-London-educated-syringe-bomber-Flight-253-exploited-loophole.html>

<sup>5</sup> "Airports on alert after Bomb Attempt on Detroit Plane", Business Week, 26 December 2009, <http://www.businessweek.com/news/2009-12-26/airports-on-alert-after-bomb-attempt-on-detroit-plane-update1-.html>

<sup>6</sup> "Terror suspect Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab faces 20 years, \$250,000 fine for attack on flight 253", New York Daily News, 26 December 2009, <http://www.nydailynews.com/news/national/2009/12/26/2009-12-26-terror-suspect-umar-farouk-abdulmutallab-charged-with-trying-to-blow-up-northwes.html>

<sup>7</sup> "Why was he ever allowed to fly? Syringe bomber had been barred from Britain, was on a terror list and even his father had warned U.S.", The Daily Mail, 27 December 2009, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-1238574/Aircraft-passengers-face-heightened-security-measures-emerges-London-educated-syringe-bomber-Flight-253-exploited-loophole.html>

<sup>8</sup> Ibid

<sup>9</sup> Days after the attempted bombing, ICPVTR Informatics Team who was monitoring jihadist websites and forums came upon a discussion/guide on how to produce concentrated sulfuric acid. Even if it wasn't directly mentioned that it was the same substance used by the Nigerian, it kind of hinted on the importance of this compound in making explosives. The analysts also said that for the past few weeks they have seen a lot of discussion about the use of different types of acid in explosives.

<sup>10</sup> "PETN: Hard to detect and just 100g can destroy a car", The Guardian, 27 December 2009, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2009/dec/27/petn-pentaerythritol-trinitrate-explosive>

Amidst the conflicting reports as to what kind of explosive device Abdulmutallab used, it is quite clear that he was able to circumvent the ban on the limited quantities of liquids to take on flights. One could note that the plot was well-planned for the most part as the suspect used only small amounts of liquid and powder as explosives, and he chose a highly volatile explosive (PETN) which could be destructive even in small amounts.

While it has several legitimate uses for medicine and as a legal explosive, the use (or attempted use) of pentaerythritol trinitrate (PETN) in terrorist attacks is not new. Experts have said the colorless PETN crystals are difficult to detect and that just 100 grams of the substance could destroy a whole car. In 2001, Richard Reid (aka “the Shoe Bomber”) attempted to detonate a PETN device to bring down an American Airlines flight en route to Miami. The explosive was hidden inside Reid’s shoes, which failed to detonate and Reid was subsequently restrained by the other passengers and is now serving a life sentence. Another attack using PETN took place in 28 August 2009 when a man with links to Al Qaeda tried to assassinate Saudi Arabian Deputy Minister of Interior, Prince Mohammed bin Nayef. The assassin was able to evade the strict security surrounding the prince by hiding the explosives inside his underwear, other reports suggests that the device was placed inside his rectum.

### **Security Response**

Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab was immediately taken into custody as soon as Flight 253 touched down in Detroit. He was taken to a local hospital to be treated for the burns he sustained during the botched bombing. The passenger who tackled the suspect was also taken to the hospital for minor injuries.



**Figure 2 A mobile phone photograph of the moment that Abdulmutallab was taken into custody  
(Photo Credit: CNN)**

Airport security around the world was increased after this incident. Some of the measures now include more pre-flight screening and that passengers are to remain seated one hour before landing. No one is also allowed to access hand luggage and a ban would be imposed on leaving possessions or blankets on laps during this time. Some countries like

France, the Netherlands, and the United Kingdom are set to introduce full body scanners for passengers, especially those bound for the United States. Admittedly, some of the measures raised only sparked questions about their cost and the privacy of the passengers.

U.S. President Barack Obama said that he had ordered a review of U.S. terrorism databases and air travel screening measures.<sup>11</sup> He acknowledged that it was the “quick and heroic actions” of the passenger and crew which had preempted disaster.<sup>12</sup>

### **Alleged links to Al Qaeda and Yemen**

An investigation is currently underway about the suspect and his suspected links with the Al Qaeda. Abdulmutallab allegedly told authorities that he acquired the explosive device in Yemen, along with instructions on when it was to be detonated.<sup>13</sup> An official from the House Intelligence Committee told the media that they have information that the suspect may have had contact with a radical, anti-American Imam (preacher) named Anwar Al Awlaki in Yemen.<sup>14</sup> Abdulmutallab claimed that he had regular contact with the Imam over the internet before he went to Yemen and trained with an Al Qaeda leader for a month while they planned the attack.<sup>15</sup> Despite these revelations, U.S. Homeland Security Secretary Janet Napolitano said that “there was no indication Abdulmutallab was acting as part of a larger plot” and she warned against those who are speculating that the suspect had been trained by the Al Qaeda.<sup>16</sup>

On 28 December 2009, three days after the attempted attack, the Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) claimed responsibility for the bombing in a statement posted in an Islamist website. The said statement was accompanied by a picture of Abdulmutallab and claimed that their “Nigerian Brother” broke all security barriers and dispelled the “great myth” of U.S. intelligence.<sup>17</sup> The AQAP claimed that Abdulmutallab used explosives technology which was developed by their “manufacturing department” and that only a “technical fault” caused the operation to fail.<sup>18</sup> The group also urged the killing of U.S.

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<sup>11</sup> “US vows to hunt down jet plotters”, BBC News, 29 December 2009, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/americas/8433178.stm>

<sup>12</sup> Ibid

<sup>13</sup> “Airports on Alert After Bomb Attempt on Detroit Plane (Update 1)”, Business Week, 26 December 2009, <http://www.businessweek.com/news/2009-12-26/airports-on-alert-after-bomb-attempt-on-detroit-plane-update1-.html>

<sup>14</sup> Ibid

<sup>15</sup> “Terror suspect Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab faces 20 years, \$250,000 fine for attack on flight 253”, New York Daily News, 26 December 2009, <http://www.nydailynews.com/news/national/2009/12/26/2009-12-26-terror-suspect-umar-farouk-abdulmutallab-charged-with-trying-to-blow-up-northwes.html>

<sup>16</sup> “Nigerian in terror try was on US watch list”, Philippine Daily Inquirer, 28 December 2009, <http://newsinfo.inquirer.net/topstories/topstories/view/20091228-244330/Nigerian-in-terror-try-was-on-US-watch-list>

<sup>17</sup> “Al Qaeda claims failed attack on US-bound plane”, Philippine Daily Inquirer, 29 December 2009, <http://newsinfo.inquirer.net/breakingnews/world/view/20091229-244450/Al-Qaeda-claims-failed-attack-on-US-bound-plane>

<sup>18</sup> “Al Qaeda claims failed attack on US-bound plane”, Philippine Daily Inquirer, 29 December 2009, <http://newsinfo.inquirer.net/breakingnews/world/view/20091229-244450/Al-Qaeda-claims-failed-attack-on-US-bound-plane>

embassy workers in the Middle East as part of their “all out war on crusaders”.<sup>19</sup> If it was confirmed that AQAP were indeed the ones behind the attack, it would be the first time that the group conducted operations outside of the Saudi-Yemen area.

On 2 January 2009, President Obama publicly accused the Al Qaeda for the attempted bombing.<sup>20</sup> In his statement posted on the White House website, President Obama said that the details of the plot are starting to unravel and that it appeared that the AQAP had armed and trained Abdulmutallab for the attack.<sup>21</sup>

### **Who is Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab?**

There has been much media hype about Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab. He is the son of Dr. Alhaji Umaru Mutallab, who was a government minister in the 1970s before becoming the head of the First Bank of Nigeria.<sup>22</sup> He attended the British International School in Lomo, Togo for his secondary education and even then he had a reputation of being a devoted Muslim.<sup>23</sup> In 2005, he took up engineering at the University College London. While in the United Kingdom, Abdulmutallab stayed in high-end neighborhoods and essentially led a privileged lifestyle. He graduated from university in 2008 and his father sent him to Dubai soon after.<sup>24</sup>

In May 2009, he tried to go back to the United Kingdom to study but immigration authorities denied him entry as they feel that he was applying for a bogus degree.<sup>25</sup> News reports said that he left Dubai sometime in July 2009 and that he cut off all communication with his family. In August 2009, Abdulmutallab visited his hometown in Abuja, Nigeria and is said to have spent two weeks there before going to Yemen. He apparently got a visa to study Arabic at a language school. It has not been fully confirmed with whom he made contact in Yemen but apparently it was during his time there that he became a full-fledged radicalized extremist.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> “US vows to hunt down jet plotters”, BBC News, 29 December 2009,

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/americas/8433178.stm>

<sup>20</sup> “Obama blames Al Qaeda for Christmas Day jet “bomb”, BBC News, 2 January 2010,

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/americas/8437496.stm>

<sup>21</sup> Ibid

<sup>22</sup> “Flight 253 terrorist Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab led life of luxury in London before attempted attack”, New York Daily News, 27 December 2009, [http://www.nydailynews.com/news/national/2009/12/27/2009-12-27\\_untitled\\_2london27m.html](http://www.nydailynews.com/news/national/2009/12/27/2009-12-27_untitled_2london27m.html)

<sup>23</sup> Ibid

<sup>24</sup> Ibid

<sup>25</sup> “Why was he ever allowed to fly? Syringe bomber had been barred from Britain, was on a terror list and even his father had warned U.S.”, The Daily Mail, 27 December 2009,

<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-1238574/Aircraft-passengers-face-heightened-security-measures-emerges-London-educated-syringe-bomber-Flight-253-exploited-loophole.html>

<sup>26</sup> “Why was he ever allowed to fly? Syringe bomber had been barred from Britain, was on a terror list and even his father had warned U.S.”, The Daily Mail, 27 December 2009,

<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-1238574/Aircraft-passengers-face-heightened-security-measures-emerges-London-educated-syringe-bomber-Flight-253-exploited-loophole.html>



**Figure 3 Photo Credit BBC**

The suspects' own family had some concerns over his behavior. Sometime in November 2009 (approximately four weeks before the attempted bombing), Dr. Mutallab told the United States Embassy in Abuja, Nigeria, about his concerns for his son's religious beliefs.<sup>27</sup> The information was passed on to other intelligence agencies which then placed Abdulmutallab in the U.S. government's terror database. Apparently, the suspect's name is included in the Terrorist Identities Datamart Environment database (TIDE) which is managed

by the U.S. National Counterterrorism Centre. However, U.S. officials have said that they do not have enough information to place Abdulmutallab in the 400,000-person terror watch list or on the no-fly list which had fewer than 4,000 people in it.<sup>28</sup>

According to information from Yemen authorities, Abdulmutallab left Yemen for Ethiopia on 7 December 2009. He stayed there for a couple of days before going to Ghana where he stayed for about two weeks. News sources said that it was in Ghana where he bought his plane ticket going to the United States on 16 December 2009. He allegedly paid cash for the ticket at the KLM airport counter in Accra, Ghana. He flew from Ghana to Nigeria on the 24<sup>th</sup> of December and then boarded a KLM flight for Amsterdam in the Netherlands. He went through the normal security procedures at the Schipol Airport in Amsterdam and then boarded Delta/Northwest Flight 253 bound for Detroit where he made the attempt to set off an explosive device.

On 6 January 2010, Abdulmutallab was indicted by a U.S. Grand Jury over the plot to bomb Flight 253 over Detroit on Christmas Day. The charges include the attempted use of a weapon of mass destruction; attempted murder within the special aircraft jurisdiction of the U.S.; willful attempt to destroy and wreck an aircraft; willfully placing a destructive device in or near an aircraft which was likely to endanger the safety of the aircraft; and two counts of possession of a firearm (bomb) in furtherance of violence crime.<sup>29</sup> The arraignment is scheduled to be on 8 January 2010.

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<sup>27</sup> "Why was he ever allowed to fly? Syringe bomber had been barred from Britain, was on a terror list and even his father had warned U.S.," The Daily Mail, 27 December 2009, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-1238574/Aircraft-passengers-face-heightened-security-measures-emerges-London-educated-syringe-bomber-Flight-253-exploited-loophole.html>

<sup>28</sup> Ibid

<sup>29</sup> "Nigerian charged over plane plot", BBC News, 6 January 2010, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/americas/8444694.stm>



**Figure 4 Route of Abdulmutallab leading to the Christmas Day plot as charted by the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) 29 December 2009**

### Impact Analysis

The attempted bombing of Flight 253 had impacts far beyond that of the aviation industry. It should be recalled that when the 9/11 attacks happened in 2001, the airline industry suffered from a big drop in revenues and the industry was at an all-time low. When the stock markets opened on 28 December 2009, or three days after the attempted bombing, shares in Delta Airlines, the parent company of Northwest went down by 4.1 percent.<sup>30</sup> Shares for American Airlines and United Airlines, both of which were directly affected by the 9/11 attacks, were also affected. The shares of American Airlines' parent company, AMR, fell by 4.8 percent.<sup>31</sup> The shares of UAL Corp., the parent company of United Airlines, went down by 3.4 percent while U.S. Airways Group shares were down by 6.7 percent.<sup>32</sup>

More pressing concerns raised by this attempted bombing are whether the need for an increased security in the aviation industry would mean a decrease in the demand for air travel. There have been some proposals that airports around the world should just switch from X-rays and metal detectors to full body scanners. But such changes would come at an additional cost as body scanning equipment start at about USD 1 million and some governments may not have the resources. Admittedly, increased security measures would add some extra costs for flights and some passengers could just opt to cancel travel plans altogether if the costs get too high.

Aviation security has come a long way since 9/11 but this incident only goes to show that there are still more that needs to be done. There is a need to review current aviation security measures and to verify that information-sharing amongst intelligence agencies are indeed in place. Given the feasibility of the aviation industry as a target for terrorist threat groups, there is still a relatively high potential for attacks to be carried out against it.

<sup>30</sup> "Security fears hit airline shares", BBC News, 28 December 2009, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/business/8432947.stm>

<sup>31</sup> Ibid

<sup>32</sup> Ibid

Another issue which was highlighted by this incident is the problem of identifying potential terrorists. For all intents and purposes, Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab, did not have the social background or embattled past one might expect from a person who is prone to violence. There are no consistent profiles to help identify who may be vulnerable to radicalization or have already been indoctrinated into a violent ideology.

It is important to note though that in this case there was sufficient information that should have caused Abdulmutallab to undergo additional security screening. Even without intelligence information, the airline security staff should have questioned him based on his travel arrangements; if one pays for a one-way ticket in cash for an international flight and has no checked baggage it is an indicator of a suspicious activity. Other similar indicators should be identified which would require additional security scrutiny.