

Chechen bomber in link to Brigitte plot

By: Martin Chulov, Ean Higgins

REGIONAL intelligence agencies are investigating whether a mystery Chechen bomber linked to an alleged Sydney terror conspiracy was also behind a foiled plot to detonate chemical truck bombs in Jordan five months ago.

NSW police have been briefed about fresh fears surrounding Abou Salah, a Chechen bomb-maker named by Frenchman Willie Brigitte as the man he was sent to Sydney to rendezvous with in May 2003.

The Jordan plot, which targeted the United States embassy and intelligence offices in Amman, has been deemed the most serious attempt by al-Qa'ida to use chemical weapons. It was also one of the first signs that Chechen militants were prepared to align their cause to that of Islamic jihadis outside Russia.

Jordanian police and the CIA have been hunting for a Chechen they believe orchestrated the massive chemical weapons plot, which was foiled when six Arab militants were arrested in early April.

Another four men were later killed in a shoot-out with police. Five trucks filled with chemicals and explosives were intercepted 120km inside Jordan having crossed the Syrian border by road. The main chemical seized in the trucks was sulphuric acid, which can also be used as a booster for conventional explosives.

The common link between the Amman and Sydney cases is that the Chechen being hunted over the Amman plot is thought to have passed through a Pakistan-based training camp for banned terrorist group Lashkar-e-Taiba in late 2001.

Brigitte, who was arrested then deported from Sydney in October last year, has admitted to being at the camp at the same time.

The federal Government's spy agencies are so far not convinced of a link, with one informed national security source describing the suggestion as ``highly speculative". Until recently they had also been sceptical of the existence of a Chechen in the Brigitte plot, with some investigators believing the name Abou Salah had been thrown up as a smokescreen.

Leading security expert Rohan Gunaratna told The Australian the Chechen link was being rigorously explored by regional intelligence agencies.

``It is known that a Chechen was involved in both cases," he said. ``However, it is not yet known that this was the same person. ``There are very few specialists in the world who have that capability and who can travel."

Brigitte has since withdrawn the statement he signed incriminating Salah. However, chief French counter-terrorism judge Jean-Louis Bruguiere is convinced that Salah was a central figure in the Sydney plot.

The Australian Federal Police have alleged that Brigitte and a man they arrested in April, Faheem Khalid Lodhi, were members of an LET cell that intended to bomb a major piece of Australian infrastructure, possibly the national electricity grid.

The Beslan hostage tragedy has provided another example of Chechen militants aligning their cause to that of Islamic jihadis outside Russia.

Dr Gunaratna said reports that the Beslan terrorists included Arabs as well as Chechens confirmed that al-Qa'ida had played an integral role

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``This operation could not have been organised without the co-operation and input from foreign mujaheddin who are also more experienced in staging such spectacular and theatrical events," Dr Gunaratna said.

Dr Gunaratna said the Chechen threat was just one example of how al-Qa'ida's influence, expertise and fighters had spread globally, including to Southeast Asia and Australia, which remains more exposed than other Western nations because it lacks sufficient intelligence agents to investigate Islamic activism at home and in the region.

``After the American intervention in Afghanistan there has been a dispersal of the threat, because several thousand mujaheddin who had been in Afghanistan are now operating worldwide," he said.

``Australia faces a continuous threat from al-Qa'ida and its associated groups as well as from radicalised segments of migrant communities living in Sydney and Melbourne."