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# **THE MECHANICS OF SYSTEM FAILURE**

## **What Went Wrong To Allow A Terror Attack In The Skies Over Detroit.**

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As reported yesterday (Dec. 25 2009), an Al Qaeda-linked terrorist attempted to blow up a packed commercial jet over Detroit on Friday, but was tackled by heroic passengers as he tried to explode the bomb, officials said.

Nigerian extremist Abdul Farouk Abdul-Mutallab (a/k/a Umar Farouk Abdul Mudallad), 23, was subdued immediately aboard Northwest Flight 253 minutes before the plane landed, officials said.

A White House official called the incident "an attempted act of terrorism" and immediately ordered security tightened at airports across the nation, raising travelers' fears on one of the busiest days of the year. "It was a fairly sophisticated device," Rep. Pete King (R-L.I.) told the Daily News after counterterrorism officials briefed him. "If it would have worked, he could have brought the plane down." King called the explosive "a new device."

Abdul-Mutallab, who suffered third-degree burns, told authorities he got the explosives in Yemen and received orders from Al Qaeda operatives to detonate the device aboard a plane over U.S. soil, officials said. The suspect, reportedly an engineering student at University College of London, said he had explosive powder taped to his leg. He confessed to trying to use a chemical-filled syringe designed to ignite the powder, ABC News reported.

"The subject is claiming to have extremist affiliation and that the device was acquired in Yemen along with instructions as to when it should be used," a federal bulletin warned. King said Abdul-Mutallab was not on a no-fly list, but was known to have terrorist connections in northern Africa - a hotbed of militant activity. "He's part of a terrorist nexus," King said.

Officials said Abdul-Mutallab was traveling one way, without a return ticket. He boarded the Airbus 330 in Amsterdam after transferring from another flight out of Lagos, Nigeria. The flight then continued to Detroit.

Passengers said the frightening incident lasted only a few, chaotic minutes. Several said they heard a loud popping noise, smelled smoke and then spotted flames leaping from the man's lap. "It was higher than the seat," Stephanie van Herk, 22, told The Wall Street Journal.

Pandemonium ensued as crew members tried to douse the suspect with water. Passenger Syed Jafry said that's when a burly man jumped over several seats and tackled the blood-thirsty extremist.



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"He took him under his arm and got hold of his neck and then other people helped him," Jafry, who was sitting three rows behind the suspect, told Fox News. "He handled it very well." "It was terrifying," Richelle Keepman told CNN. "We all thought we weren't going to land, we weren't going to make it."

Authorities on Friday night were investigating how Abdul-Mutallab got on the plane with explosives.

The Homeland Security Department said passengers may see additional screening measures on all flights because of the incident. "We encourage those with future travel plans to stay in touch with their airline and to visit [www.tsa.gov](http://www.tsa.gov) for updates," the department said.

In an exclusive news briefing published by the Northeast Intelligence Network, "... a law enforcement source speaking to this investigator, [said] the suspect is on several terrorism watch lists and is also reportedly on a federal no-fly list, although there is some confusion about the latter. "It might be the result of variations of the suspect's name," stated this source, although this source admitted it would be unusual due to the methods currently employed to guard against such omissions. This source also stated that there is "direct intelligence that links this suspect to al Qaeda in other countries beyond Nigeria, including persons of interest currently living in the UK and the United States." The investigation in the U.S. is just beginning, and it is expected that "federal authorities will be interviewing at least three other individuals in the greater Detroit area," he added. "The status of other aircraft and flights are also of significant concern," stated this source.

Two immediate concerns are raised by this incident, namely, how were the ingredients for this crude device smuggled onboard an international aircraft? Secondly, and perhaps more importantly, as the suspect is on several watch lists and possibly one no-fly list, how was he able to board and fly in spite of all security precautions including the vaunted US-Visit program which collects biometrics from each person visiting the US?

The answer to the first question about smuggling the ingredients onboard will take some time and will be handled by various agencies in the US and overseas. The fact of the matter is that was able to bring these items onboard and unchecked. His attempt at creating an explosion that would have potentially killed 278 passengers and 11 crew members and countless others in the Detroit area below was not necessarily a failure.

Abdul-Mutallab's goal, by virtue of the term "terror-attack" was to create terror, fear and panic. To this end he has been successful as the flying public and the airlines now have legitimate concerns about their safety. Those persons on the ground under the flight paths of aircraft are expressing their concerns for their safety.

The second question is more troubling. Abdul-Mutallab was able to board because he met all the conditions of the US-VISIT program as it pertains to connecting US-bound international flights.



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It has been reported that Abdul-Mutallab may have been a known Muslim activist as early as 2003 in Indonesia. More recently he has been based in North Africa involved in the criminal and terror element based there.

But how did Abdul-Mutallab get here?

Very simply, the system that is supposed to safeguard us failed.

The system failed in a number of areas. The US-VISIT program is a biometric based system wherein it is supposed to match people entering the US with fingerprints on file to determine if those persons are welcome.

Most terrorists and other criminal type persons have not flooded to US government offices to have their fingerprints registered. There are few biometric fingerprint records on file that have been unequivocally linked to persons involved in terror or major criminality.

Secondly, those people that have been given the duties of screening people do not have the full set of tools that they need to properly identify those persons that should not be allowed to fly to North America. Physical, visual identification of travellers is next to impossible based upon the fact that there are hundreds, if not thousands, of pictures of 'persons of interest' yet there is the need to move passengers through a terminal at a set pace in an orderly fashion.

The system therefore is relying on a biometric database that has been touted as the major foundation of the security plan known as the US-VISIT program. As has been pointed out previously both [here](#) and elsewhere, the database and biometric style are not the working.

The database system for biometric collection has failed. And they will continue to fail unless it is changed. This is not the first time that this warning has been made. It has been a matter of discussion among IT and security professionals as early as 2003. It was further discussed [here](#) in January 2008 under the headline "[US VISIT PROGRAM – A DOOR WITHOUT A LOCK? A False Sense of Security Is More Dangerous Than No Security At All](#)"

The first major problem is simple. It is the lack of a quick search capability due to the fingerprint database size and its exponential growth.

The second problem is an exploitable flaw wherein the fingerprint records entered are based upon data from the weakest source, namely the enrollee. Simply stated, the fingerprint registered is linked to the identification presented but if that identification is wrong (or false) then the record is useless.

Unless this program is properly thought out and overhauled, unless this program utilizes technology currently available such as the B-One database engine or equivalent, the future of its operation as an effective tool in combating criminality and terror is questionable. It will remain between the citizens of the US and their officials to determine the best course of action in these matters.