

Editorial - December 18, 2006

Former Russian Spy Poisoning: Is it an Act of Terrorism?

On November 23, 2006, former KGB spy Alexander Litvinenko died at a London hospital from apparent Polonium 210 poisoning. Polonium 210 is a highly toxic, highly radioactive, powdery substance. It is used as a trigger in nuclear weapons, and is a byproduct of nuclear reactors. Polonium 210 is toxic to humans if ingested, inhaled or absorbed. An amount of 10 billionths of a gram, if inhaled, is fatal to a person. Therefore, a single gram of Polonium 210 can, theoretically, kill 100 million people.

On his death bed Litvinenko pointed his finger at Russian Federation President Vladimir Putin, as complicit in his poisoning. At last month's European Summit, Putin denied any involvement in Litvinenko's death. The Russian foreign ministry has similarly denied any involvement on the part of the Russian government.

The intrigue has spread to a number of other individuals, who purportedly came in contact with Litvinenko during the days leading up to his hospitalization, as well as some of the places he frequented. More ominously a number of British Airways planes have been identified as possibly contaminated. British Airways is in the process of contacting the approximate 36,000 passengers who have flown on the 200 or so flights, during the time surrounding Litvinenko's poisoning. It seems that the planes in question have flown all over Europe during the past month.

Of course the British National Health Service indicates that there is no threat to public health. What else would we expect them to say? That about 36,000 men, women and children have potentially come in contact with one of the planet's most deadly substances and that all involved should run to their local hospitals for tests? Such would present a huge public health crisis throughout Europe and beyond.

This leads us to the question: If not the Russians - Who?

Could it have been a terrorist organization using the cover of international espionage to obfuscate the true origin of the crime? If it is; just what is their message? Will it happen again? Where did the Polonium come from? Etc.

Moreover, Americans have been somewhat disconnected from the entire event. Although widely reported on the BBC, few American media outlets have given the story prominence. This is a mistake. British Airways and others cross the Atlantic on the New York to London route everyday. Has the contamination spread to U.S. shores, by aircraft or otherwise? If it has, how would we know? Who among us owns a Polonium detector? Further, if we were exposed to the radiation, but not the contamination of the powder itself; how would we know? Will the victims have to wait ten years for clusters of unusual cancers to develop, as has been the case with other toxic poisonings in the past?

Moreover, have the authorities and others like British Airways done all that they are obligated to do, to keep the public safe? Has their conduct been reasonable under the circumstances? Could British Airways have kept off of its planes one of the world's most deadly elements? What are the ramifications of these events, both long and short term? Who else will die?

Is this the "dirty bomb" that the world has been waiting for, but without the blast, smoke and flames? It is time that this event moved from one of spy games to one of possible terrorism.

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