

The Truth About the “Ricin Cell”:

There was No Ricin and No Cell

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Theme: [Terrorism](#)

In-depth Report: [FAKE INTELLIGENCE](#)

THE WILD CLAIMS

On 13 April, an Algerian asylum-seeker named Kamel Bourgass was found guilty of plotting to use poisons to cause a “public nuisance” in Britain. This rather minor offense has been blown up into a national crisis by the British Government, the police, the intelligence services, and the mass media, in yet another example of “counter-terror” scaremongering.

At the start of the misnamed “ricin affair” in January 2003, the public was told that an al Qaeda cell had been arrested before it could launch a terrorist attack using the chemical weapon “ricin”. The public was told that the police had discovered traces of ricin in the flat used by the cell.

It has now been established that there was no “ricin” and no “cell”.

BRAVE FACES IN SCOTLAND YARD

“Senior Scotland Yard officers are putting on a brave face even though several privately admitted that the outcome of the case was ‘disappointing’... [After] one of the biggest operations mounted by SO13, the Yard’s anti-terrorist branch, only one man, Kamel Bourgass, was convicted of a terrorist offence” — his eight co-defendants were found not guilty or had charges dropped against them. (Sunday Times, 17 Apr., p. 4)

It was “blow” to police and the intelligence services, who “arrested more than 100 people and visited 26 countries” during a two-year investigation. (The Times, 14 Apr., p. 1)

Defense lawyers said (accurately) that it was “a ‘catastrophic’ embarrassment for the government’s war on terror.” (Financial Times, 14 Apr., p. 5)

THE TRUTH ABOUT RICIN

Kamel Bourgass confessed to having copied out a recipe for making ricin, a poison which can kill if it is injected, eaten or inhaled. “The jury heard that the plan had been to kill people by smearing ricin on door handles in Holloway, north London. But Prof [Alistair] Hay [the toxicologist] said: ‘With these recipes they could not have killed people. Ricin is not absorbed through the skin.’”(The Guardian, April 14, 2005)

The US Government’s Center for Disease Control and Prevention website says of “skin and eye exposure”: “Ricin in the powder or mist form can cause redness and pain of the skin and the eyes.”

Redness and pain. That is what Bourgass was convicted of conspiring to inflict on North Londoners.

“Porton Down scientists who tried to recreate Bourgass’s experiments found that they might have produced material sufficient to kill a large sheep, but not a single human being, let alone thousands.” (Editorial, *The Observer*, 17 April)

THE SHIFTING CHARGES

This is partly why Bourgass was convicted only of conspiring to cause a “public nuisance” — a common law offense said by the Crown to involve plotting to use poisons to cause “‘disruption, fear and injury’... the jury could not decide on a more serious charge of conspiracy to murder using poisons, including ricin and cyanide, for which he had recipes. He will not face retrial on this charge.” (*Daily Telegraph*, 14 Apr., p. 1)

“Charges against the [defendants] claiming they conspired to make chemical or biological weapons were quietly withdrawn from some of the original indictments drawn up by the Crown Prosecution Service. Instead, prosecutors substituted charges of ‘conspiracy to cause a public nuisance’ — highly unusual charge dismissed by defence lawyers as a ‘Mickey Mouse’ offence. Because of a gagging order granted by the court at the request of government lawyers, the fact that the chemical weapons charges had been dropped was not reported.” (*Sunday Times*, 17 Apr., p. 4)

RICIN NOT FOUND

When a team from Porton Down chemical and biological weapons research centre entered Bourgass’s flat on 5 Jan. 2003, it detected the presence of ricin: “But these were high sensitivity field detectors, for use where a false negative result could be fatal.” “A few days later in the lab, Dr Martin Pearce, head of the Biological Weapons Identification Group, found that there was no ricin.” (Duncan Campbell, *The Guardian*, 14 Apr.)

There are different accounts of what happened next. Duncan Campbell says in the *Guardian* that, “when this result was passed to London, the message reportedly said the opposite.”

The *Sunday Times* says that Porton Down “only formally informed Scotland Yard about their new findings at a meeting in March [2005]”: “Sources in the case say Andrew Gould, a scientist at Porton Down whose role was to liaise with Scotland Yard, has accepted responsibility for the bungle. Gould admitted in court that he had not passed on the test results and that the public had been misled as a result.” (*Sunday Times*, 17 Apr., p. 4)

This is contradicted by another *Guardian* report that says that, “Porton Down documents show that by January 8 scientists at the defense research facility had written to the police declaring there was no ricin on several items from the flat.” (*Guardian*, 14 Apr.) An intriguing mystery.

Whatever the truth behind these confusing reports, it is a fact that the non-existence of the ricin supposedly at the heart of the “ricin” trial received little attention in the media. The *Telegraph* left it to the last paragraph of their front-page story to tell its readers that the initial ricin scare had been a “false positive result.” The *Guardian* left it to the 25th paragraph in its 28-paragraph main story to note that ricin was not actually found.

AL QAEDA NON-CONNECTION: MEGUERBA

There was no ricin. There was no “cell”. What about al Qaeda? The Telegraph said Bourgass was “trained by al-Qaeda to be one of its top poisoners . . . a trained assassin and one of Osama bin Laden’s most ruthless followers.” (14 Apr., pp. 1, 2) The only evidence to this effect came from the confession of a fellow Algerian, Mohammed Meguerba, under “interrogation” by the Algerian security forces.

Interesting, then, that, “Evidence from Meguerba was withheld from the jury during the trial, after the prosecution argued he was an unreliable witness.” “Although information said to come from Meguerba was used to mount the raid that led to the ricin arrests, he later changed his story when interviewed in Algeria by British police officers, saying that he played no part in preparing the poisons and had merely heard Bourgass talking about his expertise as a poison maker.” (Observer, 17 Apr., p. 8)

AL QAEDA NON-CONNECTION: THE RECIPES & GSPC

The prosecution argued that Bourgass had copied chemical recipes from al Qaeda manuals. But, “It [Bourgass’s recipe book] had nothing to do with al-Qaeda and was translated into Arabic from American survival handbooks. This was demonstrated by Duncan Campbell, the espionage expert, and accepted as such by Porton Down, the MOD’s chemical research establishment.” (Simon Jenkins, The Times, 15 Apr., p. 20)

It has been alleged (but not proven) that Bourgass is a member of the Algerian terror group the GSPC. But the GSPC is not al Qaeda.

As the Financial Times notes, “the trial has ended without producing any definitive evidence of Mr Bourgass’s links with any terrorist organization, and with questions remaining over his true identity and that of a co-conspirator Mohamed Meguerba who remains detained in Algeria.” (14 Apr., p. 5)

MEGUERBA: AGENT PROVOCATEUR?

“The Observer has discovered that [Meguerba] was forced by his country’s intelligence service to make a telephone call to Britain to ‘provoke’ his associates into further action... The news raises the possibility that Meguerba was working for the Algerians as an agent provocateur... One call had been made to ‘locate’ an individual of interest to Algerian intelligence, and a second to ‘provoke’ another person.” (17 Apr., p. 8)

Interestingly, “Bourgass himself said that he had copied out the poison recipes at Meguerba’s request.” (Sunday Telegraph, 17 Apr., p. 21)

BOURGASS’ MURDERER

The one crime definitely committed by Bourgass was the killing of Detective Constable Stephen Oake, part of the team that arrested Bourgass. However, “a vital question remains unanswered... was he a hardened terrorist, or a fugitive scared out of his wits at being sent home.” Bourgass is a failed asylum seeker turned illegal immigrant. (The Independent, 15 Apr., p. 42)

RICIN AND THE WAR

"Tony Blair claimed at the time of Bourgass's arrest just before the Iraq war, in flagrant contempt of court, that he was intent on launching 'weapons of mass destruction' with 'huge potential' ... Peter Hain predicted a 'ricin attack', whatever that is, on the House of Commons. All this was garbage." (Simon Jenkins, The Times, 15 Apr., p. 20) Blair went to the Commons in Feb. 2003 "to tell MPs that the alleged conspiracy was 'powerful evidence' of a continuing terror threat to the nation." (The Independent, 14 Apr., p. 4) George W. Bush and his Cabinet also used "the ricin plot" to build a justification for the invasion of Iraq.

We know now that there was no ricin, and no "cell". One man experimented with poisons — showing no signs of preparing to use them in this country. There is no evidence (apart from the unreliable Meguerba) as to the intended targets of "the plot" or as to Bourgass's alleged terrorist affiliations. The "chemical weapon" was not lethal, but merely irritating to the skin.

The pathetic reality behind the lies that led to war.

Milan Rai is author of Regime Unchanged: Why the War on Iraq Changed Nothing (Pluto Press, October 2003) and War Plan Iraq: Ten Reasons Against War with Iraq (Pluto Press, November 2002), both very highly recommended. He is a member of Active Resistance to the Roots of War

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