

Suspect charged in Times Square car bomb plot

Shahzad, 30, is a naturalized US citizen and had recently returned from a five-month trip to Pakistan

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New York: A Pakistan-born US citizen accused of driving a bomb-laden vehicle into Times Square was last night charged with five counts, including an attempt to explode a weapon of mass destruction.

Prosecutors also said the suspect admitted that he received bomb-making training in Pakistan.

Law enforcement officials say Faisal Shahzad was on board a Dubai-bound flight at John F. Kennedy airport when FBI agents and New York Police Department detectives took him into custody late Monday.

Investigators tracked down Shahzad through the vehicle identification number on the 1993 Nissan Pathfinder that was filled with fireworks, two containers of gasoline and three propane tanks wired with two clocks, New York City Police Commissioner Raymond Kelly said.

Faisal Shahzad, 30, was identified by customs agents and stopped before boarding, Holder said early Tuesday in Washington.

The suspect became a naturalised US citizen in April 2009 after marrying an American citizen, according to a US official.

Shahzad had recently returned from a five-month trip to Pakistan, where he has a wife, according to law enforcement officials.

Earlier, US officials halted the New York-Dubai flight just before takeoff before removing three people, Emirates airline said. "Emirates can confirm that its flight EK 202 (from New York to Dubai on May 3) operated by a Boeing 777-300 ER, was called back by the local authorities prior to departure. Three passengers were removed from the flight," the airline said in a statement sent to *Gulf News*.

"The flight was delayed for around 7 hours and departed at 06:29 local time. Full security procedures were activated, including the deplaning of all passengers and a thorough screening of the aircraft, passengers, and baggage".

"Emirates is cooperating with the local authorities," it said, adding that "Emirates takes every necessary precaution to ensure the safety and well-being of its passengers and crew and regrets the inconvenience caused."

The three passengers were escorted from the aircraft by "US authorities," a spokeswoman for the carrier told AFP. New York police chief Raymond Kelly has said more than one person may have been involved in the attempted bombing, but offered no specifics.

Following the arrest, media reports said the US attorney's office in Manhattan was handling the case and Shahzad would appear in court Tuesday, but the charges were not made public. FBI agents searched the home at a known address for Shahzad in Bridgeport, Connecticut, early Tuesday, said agent Kimberly Mertz.

Authorities removed filled plastic bags from the house overnight in a mixed-race, working-class neighborhood of multi-family homes in Connecticut's largest city. A bomb squad came and went without entering as local police and FBI agents gathered in the cordoned-off street.

Shahzad was being held in New York overnight and couldn't be contacted. A phone number at a listed address for Shahzad in Shelton, Connecticut, wasn't in service.

Law enforcement officials say Shahzad bought the SUV, a 1993 Nissan Pathfinder, from a Connecticut man about three weeks ago and paid cash.

The vehicle identification number had been removed from the Pathfinder's dashboard, but it was stamped on the engine, and investigators used it to find the owner of record, who told them he had sold the vehicle to a stranger.

As the SUV buyer came into focus, investigators backed off other leads, although Holder said US authorities "will not rest until we have brought everyone responsible to justice," suggesting additional suspects are being sought.

The SUV was parked on Saturday night on a busy midtown Manhattan street near a theater showing "The Lion King".

The explosive device inside it had cheap-looking alarm clocks connected to a 16-ounce (450-gram) can filled with fireworks, which were apparently intended to detonate gas cans and set propane tanks afire in a chain reaction "to cause mayhem, to create casualties," police Commissioner Raymond Kelly said.

A metal rifle cabinet placed in the SUV's cargo area was packed with fertilizer, but NYPD bomb experts believe it was not a type volatile enough to explode like the ammonium nitrate grade fertilizer used in previous terrorist bombings.

Police said the SUV bomb could have produced “a significant fireball” and sprayed shrapnel with enough force to kill pedestrians and knock out windows. A vendor alerted a police officer to the parked SUV, which was smoking.

Times Square, clogged with tourists on a warm evening, was shut down for 10 hours. A bomb squad dismantled the explosive device, and no one was hurt.

But Holder said Americans should remain vigilant. "It's clear," he said, "that the intent behind this terrorist act was to kill Americans."

In Pakistan, Interior Minister Rahman Malek said authorities had not been formally asked for help in the probe. “When the request comes, we will cooperate with the US government,” he told the AP.

The Pakistani Taliban appeared to claim responsibility in videos that surfaced after the weekend scare, monitoring groups said, but police had no evidence to support the claims. The SUV was parked near offices of Viacom Inc., which owns Comedy Central.

The network recently aired an episode of the animated show “South Park” that the group Revolution Muslim had complained insulted the Prophet Mohammad (PBUH) by depicting him in a bear costume.

The date of the botched bombing, May 1, was International Workers Day, a traditional date for political demonstrations, and thousands of people had rallied for immigration reform that day in New York.

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