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"Islamic Fundamentalism, Terrorism and al Qaeda in  
Africa"

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Thank you for the opportunity to talk with you today about the extremely important issue of terrorism in West Africa. I represent only myself here, not any of the organizations I work with.

I accidentally stumbled on the ties between al Qaeda and the blood diamond trade shortly after 9/11. Since then, I have continued to work with several other people and groups that have uncovered much of what is known about terrorist ties in West Africa. These include the prosecutor and chief investigator for the UN-backed Special Court for Sierra Leone; Global Witness, the London-based NGO monitoring the blood diamond trade; and members of different monitoring groups of the United Nations. My discussion today is based on these series of investigations.

We have talked to multiple sources who sat in the actual meetings with the al Qaeda operatives in Sierra Leone and Liberia, where diamond deals were struck; miners in the bush who spent time with the terrorists; and those who escorted them to meetings with senior Liberian leaders and commanders of their allies in the Revolutionary United Front in neighboring Sierra Leone.

The RUF was a particularly brutal group. Its members won international notoriety for their

signature atrocity: the use of machetes to amputate the arms, legs, ears and lips of men, women and children. They carried out a systematic campaign of rape across much of their country and recruited their troops by kidnapping thousands of young children, whom they turned into killing machines. We have identified at least four senior al Qaeda operatives as having been active in the region over a period three years prior to 9/11.

I say this only to give you a sense of where the information comes from, because some in the intelligence community continue to say our information cannot be corroborated.

We know there are at least two international terrorist groups operating in West Africa: Hezbollah, which has long-standing, historic ties to the Lebanese diasporas centered in Abidjan, Ivory Coast and dominating trade throughout the region; and al Qaeda, which has had an interest in the regional diamond trade that extends at least back to the mid-1990s. Why would a group like al Qaeda choose West Africa as a place to operate? There are multiple reasons, but one of the most important factors is that in states such as Liberia, Sierra Leone and most others in the region, governments are weak, corrupt and exercise little control over much of the national territory.

Some states, like Liberia under Charles Taylor, were in essence functioning criminal enterprises. For the right price, Taylor let al Qaeda, Russian organized crime, Balkan organized crime, Hezbollah, and other criminal elements operate under his protection for many years.

There is a wealth of documentary and anecdotal evidence that al Qaeda sought to exploit the diamond businesses in West Africa, East Africa and Europe for many years.

One of the most interesting confirmations of bin Laden's personal interest in the West African diamond trade came in November 2003. Shaykh Abdul Qadir Fadlallah Mamour, a radical Senegalese Muslim cleric expelled from Italy for supporting al Qaeda, was asked by reporters if he had ever met bin Laden. Yes, Mamour replied, he had met bin Laden three times between 1993 and 1996. The reason, he said, was that bin Laden was financing Mamour's diamond business, which consisted of "selling diamonds between West Africa and Belgium."<sup>1</sup>

There appear to have been two phases in al Qaeda's diamond activities. The first started sometime before 1996, when bin Laden lived in the Sudan, and was aimed at helping finance the organization. This lasted until the end of 2000. Some of the evidence was provided by Wadi el Hage,

bin Laden's personal secretary until he was arrested in September 1998. During his trial, El Hage's file of business cards, personal telephone directory and handwritten notebooks were introduced as evidence. The notebooks contain extensive notes on buying diamonds and chronicles attempts to sell diamonds across Africa and Europe. There is a page on Liberia, with telephone numbers and names. His address book and business card file were full of the names of diamond dealers and jewelers, often including the purchaser's home phone number.

Unfortunately, U.S. and European intelligence agencies paid little attention to what was viewed as secondary documents and statements in the trial. Most of el Hage's notebooks, written in Arabic, have still not been translated into English.<sup>ii</sup>

It is not clear how profitable al Qaeda's diamonds ventures were. El Hage and others did not keep sales records. The record in Sierra Leone and Liberia is also sketchy. The first known contacts with the Taylor regime came in September 1998—just weeks after the bombings of two U.S. embassies in East Africa. A group of senior al Qaeda leaders involved in those attacks moved to West Africa, where they intermittently bought diamonds for the next two years.

Al Qaeda did not stumble blindly into Liberia in the hopes of acquiring diamonds. They used their contacts in the region, including one Senegalese soldier of fortune who fought with the *mujahdeen* in Afghanistan in the mid-1980s. He had been trained in Moamar Gadaffi's terrorist training camps in the early 1980s. After fighting in Afghanistan, the man, Ibrahim Bah, returned to Libya, then went to fight with Hezbollah in Lebanon. He returned to Libya in the late 1980s and became the personal instructor of the cadre of West African leaders who would wreak havoc on the region: Charles Taylor in Liberia; Foday Sankoh of the RUF; Blaise Compaore in Burkina Faso and others. In 1998 Bah was a general in the RUF as well as Taylor's chief gate keeper for diamond dealing. You could only do business in Liberia if you went through Bah. He set up al Qaeda as he did others who could pay the opening price of \$50,000 for a piece of the action.

Since Taylor controlled Liberian immigration, the al Qaeda operatives were able to come and go unhindered. He also used his country to issue airplane registrations to Victor Bout, one of the world's largest illegal weapons dealers. By registering his airplanes in Liberia, Bout was able to fly his aircraft without any questions being asked or inspections carried out. Bout was later

discovered not only to be selling weapons to most sides of most civil wars in Africa, but also to the Taliban AND the Northern Alliance in Afghanistan. He often took his payment in diamonds.

The picture of al Qaeda operations in West Africa changes dramatically toward the end of 2000, when senior al Qaeda operatives arrived in Monrovia, Liberia. They set up a monopoly arrangement for the purchase of diamonds through Taylor with the RUF. Then, al Qaeda buyers went on a spree that lasted several months. But here the intention was not to make money, but rather to buy the stones as a way of transferring value from other assets. This was in the months immediately prior to 9/11, when the terrorists were moving their money out of traceable financial structures into commodities in preparation for the aftermath of the attacks. To do this, the al Qaeda operatives were paying a premium over the going rate for uncut stones, leaving regular buyers without any merchandise. The pace of the purchases picked up beginning in January 2001 and lasted until just before 9/11. Telephone records from the middlemen handling the purchases show calls to Afghanistan until Sept. 10. The available evidence points to al Qaeda purchasing some \$30 million to \$50 million

worth of RUF diamonds during the eight months prior to 9/11.<sup>iii</sup>

Hezbollah operates in a more institutional manner in West Africa, where it has been operational almost since its birth in the early 1980s. Because of the hundreds of thousands of Lebanese in West Africa—the vast majority being Shi'ite Muslims--the organization has a natural constituency and family ties that bind the region to the Lebanese conflict. Hezbollah collects donations from businesses, runs shakedown operations, operates front companies, and is also deeply involved in the "blood diamond" trade. For a glimpse of how much money Hezbollah raises in the region, consider one recent case. On Dec. 25, 2003, a flight from Cotonou, Benin, in West Africa to Beirut, crashed on takeoff. On board were senior Hezbollah members, carrying \$2 million in contributions to the organization from across the region.<sup>iv</sup>

In the diamond trade, Hezbollah operates in Sierra Leone, Liberia and the Democratic Republic of Congo. These three countries all provided diamonds as a revenue stream to all factions of the Lebanese civil war. Hezbollah remains the strongest of the groups involved in the trade. I have spoken to Hezbollah loyalists in the diamond trade in

Africa. In one of the more unusual twists, these same merchants do businesses with Israeli diamond merchants. The war, one explained to me, was in the Middle East, while business was done in Africa.

In short, al Qaeda and Hezbollah have maintained an active presence in West Africa for a significant period of time.

Al Qaeda does not appear to have an extensive infrastructure in West Africa. Rather, the group was able to take advantage of the setting and resources to further its cause. I concur with Gen. Charles Wald, who will be speaking later today, who recently noted signs of al Qaeda in northern Nigeria and Mauritania, where radical Islamic clerics have gained a foothold. "They are there for a purpose, whether looking for real estate, or recruiting or looking for arms, whatever it is, there's a presence," Wald said. "It may be small, but it's a bad indicator."<sup>v</sup>

Hezbollah uses the region extensively to raise funds, recruit new members and launder money. Because it is part of a large community, it's presence there is much greater than that of al Qaeda, and more institutional. Because of that, it is both easier to identify and more difficult to uproot.

There are encouraging signs the United States is becoming more serious about dealing with the terrorism threat in sub-Saharan Africa. A first step must be to greatly enhance human intelligence on the ground. Societies in which telephones are rare, Internet communications limited to a small percentage of the population in the capital and business deals depend largely on familial relationships, our high-tech monitoring systems are of little use. People must be on the ground, not just in the capital but in the hinterland, to be able to map the connections and trace financial patterns that can be used by terrorists.

The conditions that favored al Qaeda in West Africa: corruption; conflicts over natural resources that are little studied or understood; lack of government control in vast areas; the emergence of sophisticated organized criminal networks; all continue to exist. These "failed states" or "stateless regions" are the ideal operating grounds for terrorists and other groups that pose significant threats U.S. national security and the stability of much of Africa.

Thank you.

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<sup>i</sup> Al-Sharq al-Awsat website, Nov. 30, 2003.

<sup>ii</sup> Farah, *Blood From Stones*, *op cit*, pp. 64-65.

<sup>iii</sup> Ibid

<sup>iv</sup> Matt Levitt, "Hizbullah's African Activities Remain Undisrupted," *RUSI/Janes Homeland Security Monitor*, March 1, 2004. For a fuller discussion of the Lebanese connection, including that of Hezbollah and the Amal militia, please see: Lansana Gberie, *War and Peace in Sierra Leone: Diamonds, Corruption and the Lebanese Connection*, The Diamond and Human Security Project, Occasional Paper 6, January 2003.

<sup>v</sup> Todd Pittman, "U.S.: Al Qaeda may be looking to Africa," *Associated Press*, March 6, 2004.