

BUREAU OF ALCOHOL, TOBACCO AND FIREARMS

ITAR

INTERNATIONAL TRAFFIC IN ARMS

THE TRINIDAD COUP D'ETAT



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Executive Summary

On July 28, 1990, the legitimate government of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago was almost overthrown in a coup d'etat by the Jamaat al Muslimeen (society of Moslem), utilizing firearms purchased by Louis Haneef (Louis Coleman), an American born citizen.

Louis Haneef purchased an estimated \$100,000 of firearms, ammunition, and logistical supplies over a period of 9 months in the Miami, Florida area. These supplies were shipped from Florida to Port of Spain, Trinidad, secreted in a pallet of hollowed plywood sheets.

Louis Haneef, Yasin Abu Bakr (Lennox Phillips), Bilaal Abdullah (Richard Bradshaw), and Riad Ali (Steve Chanicka), all Trinidad citizen's, and their insurgent group, the Jamaat al Muslimeen, were responsible for organizing the coup attempt. During the coup attempt hundreds were wounded, including Prime Minister A.N.R. Robinson, and approximately 25 persons were killed. The parliament building in Port of Spain and the Trinidad and Tobago Television (TTT) station were attacked and used as strongholds during the coup attempt, with 42 individuals held as hostage. There was 60 million dollars in property damaged during the coup primarily because of looting in the main district in Port of Spain, causing severe disruption to the economy of Trinidad and Tobago.

After 6 days the Black Muslim rebels abandoned their coup attempt and surrendered, releasing their hostages and vacating the television station and the parliament house.

Louis Haneef is awaiting trial in Florida for violating the Gun Control Act of 1968, as amended, the Arms Export Control Act, and the Export Administration Act. Yasin Abu Bakr, Bilaal Abdullah, and Riad Ali are presently standing trial in Trinidad for the crimes they committed during the coup, which include murder, treason, and kidnapping.

The Investigation

ATF initiated its investigation into the activities of Louis Haneef on October 24, 1989, when an off-duty City of Miami police officer noticed Haneef purchase a large quantity of high caliber assault rifles and several thousand rounds of ammunition over a 2 day period at a Fort Lauderdale, Florida Gun Show.

Information was obtained from several Florida federally licensed firearms dealers that Haneef was purchasing large quantities of firearms.

ATF notified the U.S. Customs Service and Florida's Southern District U.S. Attorney's Office, of the case and a joint investigation was begun. Haneef was questioned during the investigation regarding his purchase of large numbers of firearms. Haneef stated that he was buying the guns for investment with financial backing from another party in New York. Investigators were unable to find this financial backer, and it quickly became clear that this was an alibi that Haneef had developed to support his purchase of large amounts of firearms.

In 9 months Haneef had stock piled approximately 200 firearms, 250,000 rounds of ammunition, and other paramilitary supplies. These supplies included two-way radio gear and numerous radio base stations. Haneef purchased the radio gear from a local Florida Radio Shack franchise. In January of 1990 information was uncovered that Haneef was planning to ship the firearms outside the United States.

The Shipment

In January of 1990 Haneef had begun the processes of preparing to ship the firearms to Trinidad. He purchased a 20-foot dry storage/shipping container. He leased space at a business park to temporarily house the firearms prior to shipment. He made contact with a freight forwarder who would handle the necessary details of shipping the container. On or about April 7, 1990, Bilaal Abdullah arranged the shipment of the container from Port Everglades, Florida, to Port of Spain, Republic of Trinidad and Tobago.

Included in the shipment were approximately 200 firearms. The firearms ranged from shotguns to assault rifles and high caliber pistols. Some examples of what Haneef purchased include Mini 14 rifles, Winchester 12 gauge shotguns, Mossberg 12 gauge shotguns with extra barrels, a Calico, 9mm pistol with 100 round drum magazine, M-1 30 caliber rifles, and mini-30 assault rifles. Haneef also purchased over 250,000 rounds of ammunition, radio equipment from Radio Shack, laser sights, and hundreds of ammunition magazines.

Haneef purchased all these items from the south Florida area. His sources included local firearms dealers, retail stores such as Best Products, and a variety of gun shows. All of his sources for firearms were federally licensed firearms dealers. One local police officer who observed Haneef purchasing ammunition and loading it into his car stated that there was so much ammunition in Haneef's trunk that "the bumper was nearly dragging the ground."

The Finances

The question of how Louis Haneef obtained the estimated \$100,000 he used to purchase firearms, ammunition, and radio equipment, and pay for shipment services to Trinidad, is as yet unanswered. It is known that Abu Bakr had deposited \$18,000 in Haneef's bank account and that Abdullah had brought \$32,000 into the United States during a trip from Trinidad. The source from which Bakr and Abdullah obtained their funds is unknown, as is where the remaining approximately \$50,000 that Haneef needed to conduct this operation was obtained. It is doubtful that Haneef could have earned such a sum of money legitimately through the janitorial service he operated, or that Bakr or Abdullah could have had the means to provide such a sum.

The Siege

On July 28, 1990, the Moslem holy day, Pray Day, the Black Muslim radical group, Jamaat al Muslimeem, (JAM) began its attack of the legitimate Government of Trinidad and Tobago. The JAM, over 100 strong, ranging in age from 14 to 40, divided into two groups. The first group of 42 rebels, led by Bilaal Abdullah, attacked the parliament house (Red House), taking 17 Trinidad citizens hostage, 7 of whom were cabinet ministers, including Prime Minister A.N.R. Robinson who, during the 5 days, was severely beaten and shot in the leg. The second group of 72 rebels led by Yasin Abu Bakr attacked the Trinidad and Tobago television station (TTT), taking 29 hostages. The JAM held these two locations for 6 days until they surrendered to the Trinidad authorities. The rebels were immediately placed under arrest and transported to a holding facility. When the dust had settled, over 60 million dollars in damage had been done, over 25 people were dead, looting had destroyed the main shopping district of Port of Spain, and an 18 hour curfew had been set. The single greatest reason the coup attempt failed is that the people of Trinidad and Tobago ignored the call from the rebels to raise up and revolt against the Government. The military remained loyal to the prime minister and his leadership. Without the support of the general populous and with the military remaining intact and organized against the rebels, the coup attempt was doomed.

The Rebel Leaders

The identities and motives of the four organizers of the coup is just now beginning to come to light in the wake of their surrender and prosecution.

Louis Akhtab Haneef, the procurer of the weapons for the coup, was born Louis Sinclair Coleman on July 8, 1956, in Hartford, Connecticut. In November of 1974, Haneef was arrested by the Hartford Police and charged with a weapons violation. Although convicted, this charge is only a misdemeanor under Connecticut statutes, allowing him to retain his legal right to obtain firearms. During the period from 1987 to early 1989, Haneef was employed as a janitor with the Pompano Beach, Florida Police Department. After that he started his own janitorial service.

Bilaal Abdullah, born Richard Bradshaw in Port of Spain, Trinidad, in October of 1952, visited the Florida area prior to the coup and had direct contact with Haneef in reference to the procurement of firearms. Abdullah lead the attack of the Parliament House in Trinidad and negotiated the surrender of the JAM once the coup had failed. Abdullah is believed to be the leader and mastermind of the coup attempt.

Yasin Abu Bakr, born Lennox Phillips in Port of Spain, Trinidad, on October 18, 1941, served for 9 years as a mounted Trinidad police officer. Bakr has been quoted as having an admiration for Mommar Gaddafi and rumored to have visited Libya along with JAM members and to have received some military training.

Riad Ali was born Steve Chanicka in Port of Spain, Trinidad, on February 23, 1952. Ali closely assisted Abdullah in arranging the shipment of firearms from the United States to Trinidad. Ali held a subordinate role in the organization compared to the aforementioned three, but is believed to be the fourth primary organizer of the coup attempt.

What led these four men to become subversive Black Muslims and attempt to overthrow the Trinidad Government, is not totally clear. It is known that the economy of Trinidad is under some economic strain because of the decline in oil prices, a chief export of Trinidad. Unemployment is at 22 percent and per capita income has dropped to half what it was a year ago. Also, there have been claims of corruption and mismanagement in the Trinidad Government. These conditions may have prompted the subversive group to believe that the conditions for a coup d'etat were right and that the Trinidad populace would be supportive of a new government.

The Libya Connection

The issue of what part Libya may have played in the coup attempt is still being examined. Some information obtained during the investigation of Haneef seems to indicate that there may have been some military training provided to some of the Jamaat al Muslimeen group. Bakr has been quoted as saying that prior to the coup attempt he made several trips to Libya and that he had a great admiration for Gadhafi. Trinidad officials stated that members of the JAM group had received military training in Libya. During the investigation it was discovered that Haneef had visited Somalia, a small country on the West Coast of Africa that currently receives military aid from Libya. Also, that on January 12, 1990, Haneef had deposited \$18,000 in a Florida bank account. The deposit was made by way of 18 Visa traveler's checks drawn on the Arab Financial Services Banking Corporation. The signature on the checks was Bakr's.

The press has quoted some United States scholars as saying that, in their opinion, it was unlikely that Gadhafi was directly involved, but he has provided arms and cash to insurgents before and Libya has been trying for years to get a foothold in the Caribbean by giving money to a number of groups. Whether Libya was the source of the \$100,000 Haneef used to obtain and ship the firearms to Trinidad is uncertain, although it is very possible.

Indicators

Through analysis of the Haneef investigation, some possible indicators appear evident for future reference. It is apparent that in a case such as Haneef's, in which one person or a small group of people is attempting to obtain large numbers of U.S.-source firearms and ship them to another country illegally, some common events may take place. For example, an international arms trafficker who is dealing in firearms for profit may attempt to

- 0 Obtain firearms from a variety of different dealers.
- 0 Obtain high quality firearms.
- 0 Obtain all of a certain type of firearm a dealer may have on hand.
- 0 Place orders for large amounts of firearms
- 0 Obtain climate-controlled storage or warehouse space to store firearms.

- 0 Once purchased, leave firearms in their packaging; also, removal of markings from such packaging that may represent the contents of the container or its origin.
- 0 Place firearms into packaging that would allow it to be shipped, such as crates or cartons.
- 0 Purchase sealed shipping containers for overseas transport.
- 0 Contact freight forwarders who deal in the transport of cargo internationally.
- 0 Contact embassies and inquire about customs restrictions and regulations.
- 0 Make overseas phone calls.
- 0 Make international cash transactions.

Indicators of an international arms trafficker whose motivation is not for profit, but for political belief and the support of terrorist activities, may also include

- 0 Purchasing unusually large amounts of ammunition that could not normally be used by a single person or small group.
- 0 Purchasing assault rifles and accessories.
- 0 Purchasing or ordering of large amounts of magazines that a dealer may not normally keep in stock.
- 0 Purchasing of large amounts of sophisticated paramilitary equipment such as night vision devices.
- 0 Purchasing of supportive gear such as two-way radio equipment.

All of the above could be signs of international trafficking. They could serve as a rough gauge or profile of an international arms trafficker that a field agent may use to his advantage. These are just some of the many activities that an international U.S.-source firearms trafficker may use.

Summary

The Haneef investigation is a clear example of how U.S.-source firearms were used in the attempt to overturn the legitimate government of another country. The investigations show how a small group of people were able to obtain enough firearms, ammunition, and related equipment from U.S. sources to attempt such a coup.

The issue of U.S.-source firearms being trafficked in the international market is of great concern to ATF. The Haneef case clearly shows how, on the surface, what was first noted as suspicious activity at a Florida gun show developed into an act of aggression by a subversive group toward its government.