

The US and Great Britain accuse two Libyan nationals of responsibility for the December 1988 explosion of Pan Am flight 103 over Lockerbie, Scotland.

They've given Libya 30 days to turn over the men to stand trial.

Or else.

Actually, or else *what* is still up in the air.

Sanctions aren't really a bargaining tool. The UN Security Council already passed a resolution to suspend existing sanctions against Libya once the two guys are handed over.

Libya says they want the sanctions lifted permanently (as opposed to merely suspended) as part of the deal. But that's a minor distinction, since reimposing sanctions would require nine votes out of fifteen on the council and unanimous consent from the five permanent members, which ain't likely.

So, Libya's concern about sanctions is mostly just static. Much more importantly, they simply don't trust the US and Britain to give their citizens a fair trial. As a Libyan foreign minister explained, "The Great Jamahiriyah cannot accept that its two nationals appear in court before reaching final agreement on the arrangements that would guarantee them justice."

("The Great Jamahiriyah", by the way, is *not* the name of a reggae-singing stage magician who can dunk. Although it should be. It's how the Libyan government refers to itself as synonymous with the people of Libya. "Jamahiriyah" doesn't translate into English very well, but it refers to Qaddafi's notion of an ideal condition of free and unbureaucratic self-governance. It's a term hip Libertarians (if such a thing existed) would groove on, except it applies to Libya about as much as "people's republic" applies to China, "democracy" applies to Kuwait, or "musician" applies to Britney Spears.)

Cool name aside, Libya is a place where independent human rights monitors are banned, political opposition is forbidden and sometimes punished by death, freedom of religion doesn't exist, and all media is controlled by the state.

And that all sucks.

But none of that means Libyans blew up Pan Am 103, or that the two accused will actually get a fair trial.

The US press generally presumes their guilt, but the evidence is actually pretty dopey. Much more likely suspects were identified long ago and ignored for political reasons, as we'll see.

The prosecution theory, as William Blum points out in the current issue of *Covert Action Quarterly*, is essentially this:

Libyan Airlines employees Abdel Basset Ali al-Megrahi and Lamem Khalifa Fhimah allegedly placed a suitcase bomb on an Air Malta plane in Malta, cleverly conspiring to cause Pan Am 103's destruction by putting *baggage transfer tags* on the bomb so it would eventually explode while on a flight from London to New York.

Seriously.

From Malta, the bag proceeded unaccompanied on flight KM180 (even though Air Malta insists there was no unaccompanied baggage on the flight) to Frankfurt, where it was transferred unaccompanied *again* onto Pan Am flight 103A to London (even though the 1995 FBI report on the subject found "no concrete evidence" that this ever happened), then allowed to pass unaccompanied a *third* time to Pan Am 103 to New York (even though international rules require all unaccompanied bags to be X-rayed or searched), before finally detonating in Governor Connally's thigh and rolling off a stretcher intact in Parkland hospital.

Sorry, I get my bullshit cover stories confused sometimes.

Anyhow, except for the part about Governor Connally, that's the official version.

And the two defendants supposedly just sort of guessed that the bomb could evade security in three countries and make three different connecting flights with no further help. In fact, they *counted* on it.

Excuse me? I know fully-grown human beings who can't make a single flight without a map, two stewardesses, and a nurse.

Supporting evidence for this theory? Damn near none. No fingerprints. No witnesses. Not even hearsay or a coerced confession. The evidence consists of stuff like:

- a) Investigators once claimed that the timing device for the bomb was only sold to Libya, but that's not even true. Actually the manufacturer also sold the timers to East German intelligence, which in turn had contact with groups throughout the Mid East, including a PLO splinter faction called the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine—General Command (PFLP-GC). We'll get to them in a second here.

## Who Blew Up Pan Am 103?

- b) Investigators say that the clothes in the bomb's suitcase were traced to a particular clothing shop in Malta, and the shopkeeper has identified al-Megrahi as the purchaser. Uh, not quite. The shopkeeper has actually fingered several different people over the years, so the identification means next to nothing.
- c) There's an entry in Fhimah's diary which mentions "taggs" [*sic*]. Well, whoopity do. The entry doesn't refer to the bombing any more clearly than Tinky-Winky's triangular headgear refers to gay sex. and other crap like that.

So what's the deal?

Actually, until Iraq invaded Kuwait in August of 1990, the Syrian-funded PFLP-GC was widely considered responsible for the bombing.

With good reason. Thanks to electronic intercepts, police raids against PFLP-GC activities in Germany, and evidence gathered in the arrest of a known PFLP-GC bomber, the FBI, the CIA, the NSA, and intelligence agencies from Israel, West Germany, and Scotland firmly believed—often on the record, surprisingly—that the PFLP-GC brought down Pan Am 103 at the behest of Iran, as revenge for the US warship Vincennes' idiotic July 1988 shootdown of an Iranian passenger plane, killing 290 innocent people.

As to how the bombing took place, in simple terms, the conclusion was this:

Baggage handlers in Frankfurt—two of whom failed polygraph examinations about switching baggage—were already routinely switching bags as part of a drug-running operation, and the PFLP-GC managed to substitute a bomb for the protected shipment of heroin, tricking a Palestinian drug courier named Khalid Jaafar (identified by name by the FBI) to his doom.

Thus the big kabang.

The only problem with pursuing this version, supported by hard evidence gathered by intelligence agencies in every single country concerned? Political inconvenience.

After August 1990, George Bush wanted Syria and Iran to support his coalition against Iraq. But blaming them for the deaths of 270 innocent people, including many Americans, wasn't going to help. And Libya wasn't playing ball anyway.

So, bingo, in October 1990, suddenly Libya was behind the bombing. Syria and Iran were not. *Tada!*

Within days of the eventual indictment of two Libyans, clearing Iran of any culpability in the tragedy—despite reported NSA and Israeli intercepts indicating Iran had paid for the bombing—five Western hostages held by Iranian allies in Lebanon were released.

Ever since, Libya bombed Pan Am 103, evidence be damned. That's their story, and they're sticking to it.

Look, I'm not fond of agreeing with Qaddafi on anything beyond a taste for stuffed grape leaves, but it's indeed doubtful that the impending trial—which will be held, under Scottish law, with *no jury*—is really about getting to the truth of the matter.

Consider this: when Pan Am's lawyers, trying to find out what the hell happened, subpoenaed the CIA, DEA, FAA, FBI, NSA, and possibly the NBA by mistake, the government flatly refused to turn over a single document, citing "national security." That's not the way you act when you want to get to the absolute truth of something.

If two guys in Malta and a magic bag took out Pan Am 103, the "national security" explanation makes no sense whatsoever.

If the PFLP-GC did it, then it does.

And even leaving all that aside: ten years after the event, and after waiting eight years since the defendants were first accused, and given the goofiness of the evidence, it's hard to believe the U.S. and Britain seriously intend to go through with this.

Maybe the State Department, which presumably knows the score, just wants to embarrass Qaddafi again in an effort to rationalize calls for further sanctions.

Then again, if there's a lesson the Arab world has learned, it's this: when the U.S. says, "*or else*", duck. So maybe the State Department figures Qaddafi will decide it's worth submitting two of his people for a show trial to keep the Sixth Fleet out of the Gulf of Sidra.

If not, and the situation escalates, the irony couldn't be more clear. The US says a couple of Libyans bombed a bunch of people. So to make sure Libya turns them over for trial, the US might soon threaten to begin ... what?

Nobody's saying yet. Surely not bombing a bunch of people ...