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OHIO TRUCK DRIVER PLEADS GUILTY TO PROVIDING MATERIAL SUPPORT TO AL QAEDA

WASHINGTON, D.C. - Attorney General John Ashcroft, FBI Director Robert Mueller, Acting Assistant Attorney General Christopher Wray of the Criminal Division and U.S. Attorneys Greg Lockhart of the Southern District of Ohio and Paul McNulty of the Eastern District of Virginia announced today that an Ohio truck driver has pleaded guilty to providing material support and resources to al Qaeda and conspiracy for providing the terrorist organization with information about possible U.S. targets for attack.

Iyman Faris, a/k/a Mohammad Rauf, 34, of Columbus, Ohio, was charged in a two-count criminal information filed under seal in the U.S. District Court in Alexandria, Virginia, on May 1, 2003. Faris pleaded guilty to the charges in the criminal information on the same day. The charges and plea agreement were unsealed today.

Faris, a naturalized U.S. citizen who was born in Kashmir, faces a maximum of 20 years in prison and fines of up to \$500,000 at his sentencing, currently scheduled for Aug. 1, 2003.

In court documents accompanying the plea agreement, Faris admitted casing a New York City bridge for al Qaeda, and researching and providing information to al Qaeda regarding the tools necessary for possible attacks on U.S. targets.

“This case has many of the hallmarks we have to come to recognize in al Qaeda operations: recruitment of sympathetic operatives, extensive planning and travel inside several countries, and extensive use of hard-to-track communications such as cell phones and the Internet cafes,” said Attorney General John Ashcroft. “In apprehending Faris and reaching this plea agreement, we have taken another American-based al Qaeda operative off the streets, who appeared to be a hard-working American trucker, but secretly scouted terrorist strikes that could have killed many of his fellow citizens.”

Specifically, Faris admits traveling with a longtime friend from Pakistan to Afghanistan in late 2000. At a training camp in Afghanistan, Faris was introduced to

Usama bin Laden. Faris admitted knowing that bin Laden and his friend were senior leaders in al Qaeda, and understood that his friend was bin Laden's "right foot" - a man who served a critical leadership role in providing supplies and materials needed by al Qaeda.

Faris admitted that during a meeting in late 2000, one of bin Laden's men asked him about "ultralight" airplanes, and said al Qaeda was looking to procure an "escape airplane." Faris admitted that about two months later, he performed an Internet search at a café in Karachi, Pakistan and obtained information about ultralights, which he turned over to his friend for use by al Qaeda.

Faris also admitted accompanying his friend to a factory to order sleeping bags for al Qaeda, and visiting a travel agency at the request of his friend to obtain extensions on several airline tickets for use by members of al Qaeda.

Faris visited Karachi in early 2002 and was introduced to a man identified by his friend as the "number three man" to bin Laden - in fact, a senior operational leader in al Qaeda. Faris admitted that at a meeting a few weeks later, the operational leader asked what he could do for al Qaeda. Faris said he discussed his work as a truck driver in the United States, his trucking routes and deliveries for airport cargo planes. The al Qaeda leader told Faris he was interested in cargo planes because they would hold "more weight and more fuel."

According to Faris' admission, the operational leader then told Faris that al Qaeda was planning two simultaneous attacks in New York City and Washington, D.C. The senior al Qaeda leader spoke with Faris about destroying a bridge in New York City by severing its suspension cables, and tasked Faris with obtaining the equipment needed for that operation - described as "gas cutters" but to be referred to as "gas stations" in future coded communications. The leader also explained that al Qaeda was planning to derail trains, and asked Faris to procure the tools for that plot as well.

Faris admitted that upon returning to the United States from Pakistan in April 2002, he researched "gas cutters" and the New York City bridge on the Internet. Between April 2002 and March 2003, he sent several coded messages through another individual to his longtime friend in Pakistan, indicating he had been unsuccessful in his attempts to obtain the necessary equipment. Faris admitted to traveling to New York City in late 2002 to examine the bridge, and said he concluded that the plot to destroy the bridge by severing cables was unlikely to succeed because of the bridge's security and structure. In early 2003, he sent a message that "the weather is too hot" - a coded message indicating that the bridge plot was unlikely to succeed.

Federal law prohibits the providing of material support and resources to designated foreign terrorist organizations. Al Qaeda was designated by the Secretary of State in 1999 to be a foreign terrorist organization, and redesignated as such in October 2001.

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