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4 Men Accused of Plot to Blow Up Kennedy Airport Terminals and Fuel Lines

By **[CARA BUCKLEY](#)** and **[WILLIAM K. RASHBAUM](#)**

Four men, including a onetime airport cargo handler and a former member of the Parliament of Guyana, were charged yesterday with plotting to blow up fuel tanks, terminal buildings and the web of fuel lines running beneath Kennedy International Airport.

One of the suspects was taken into custody in Brooklyn and two others were detained in Trinidad, the authorities said, while the fourth man was still at large.

One defendant, the former cargo handler, Russell Defreitas, was arraigned yesterday in federal court in Brooklyn. He is a 63-year-old Guyanese native and naturalized American citizen who lives in Brooklyn.

Mark J. Mershon, the assistant director in charge of the [Federal Bureau of Investigation](#) field office in New York, said all four men had “fundamentalist Islamic beliefs of a violent nature,” although they appeared to be acting on their own and had no known connection to [Al Qaeda](#).

Law enforcement officials said that Kennedy, which handles roughly 45 million passengers a year and 1,000 flights a day, was never in imminent danger because the plot was only in a preliminary phase and the conspirators had yet to lay out detailed plans or obtain financing or explosives.

The airport is fed jet fuel, gasoline and heating oil through a capillary system of pipes that run from New Jersey through Staten Island, Brooklyn and Queens. Oil industry experts said safety shut-off valves would almost assuredly have prevented an exploding airport fuel tank from igniting all or even part of the network.

But officials said the four men determined to carry out their attack, having conducted “precise and extensive” surveillance of the airport using photographs, video, the recollections of Mr. Defreitas and satellite images downloaded from Google Earth.

They said the men had also traveled repeatedly to Guyana and Trinidad in recent months, seeking the blessing and financial backing of an extremist Muslim group based in Trinidad and Tobago called Jamaat al-Muslimeen, which was behind a bloody coup attempt in Trinidad in 1990.

“The enforcement action we are announcing today was taken to prevent a terrorist plot from maturing into a terrorist act,” Mr. Mershon said during a news conference yesterday at F.B.I. headquarters in Manhattan. The motive behind the planned attack, he said, “was a pattern of hatred toward the United States and the West in general.”

Mr. Defreitas was arrested Friday night at a restaurant in Brooklyn, the Lindenwood Diner. A federal magistrate judge ordered him detained at his arraignment yesterday, pending a bail hearing on Wednesday.

Mr. Defreitas walked slowly into the courtroom, his face drawn, wearing a greenish-brown knee-length tunic and loose pants. His court-appointed lawyer, Drew Carter, told Magistrate Judge Kiyo A. Matsumoto:

"There's a lot more to the story. I don't want to get into this now, because it's not a trial."

One law enforcement official played down Mr. Defreitas's ability to carry out an attack, calling him "a sad sack" and "not a Grade A terrorist." Comparing the case with the plot in which a group of men were arrested last month on charges of planning to attack soldiers at Fort Dix in New Jersey, the official said the New Jersey plotters "were a bit further along."

But the official said that Mr. Defreitas's efforts to enlist Jamaat al-Muslimeen's aid could have had devastating consequences.

"They didn't have the money and they didn't have the bombs," the official said of the suspects, "but if we let it go it could have gotten there; they could have gotten the J.A.M. fully involved, and we wouldn't know where it could have gone."

The official declined to be identified because he was not authorized to comment on the case.

Abdul Kadir, 55, a former mayor of a town in Guyana and a onetime member of Parliament in that South American country, was arrested in Trinidad on Friday. He helped Mr. Defreitas complete the plan and secure financing, according to the criminal complaint, which was unsealed yesterday.

Mr. Kadir was detained after boarding a flight on Aeropostal, a Venezuelan airline, which was to go to Caracas, an official briefed on the arrest said yesterday. The flight between Port of Spain and Caracas, which usually takes less than an hour, had taken off but the crew was told to return to Trinidad, the official said.

The third suspect, Kareem Ibrahim, 61, was arrested in Trinidad. The extradition of both Mr. Kadir and Mr. Ibrahim was being sought.

The fourth suspect, Abdel Nur, 57, remained a fugitive, the officials said, and was believed to be in Trinidad.

If convicted, all four suspects could face life in prison.

The charges were announced by Mr. Mershon; the city's police commissioner, [Raymond W. Kelly](#); [Roslynn R. Mauskopf](#), the United States attorney in Brooklyn; and other officials.

According to the criminal complaint, which was sworn out by Robert Addonizio, an investigator with the Brooklyn district attorney's office assigned to the Joint Terrorism Task Force, the authorities became aware of the plot in January 2006; officials would not say how.

An informant with a criminal history including drug trafficking and racketeering agreed to work with investigators on the case, in exchange for payments and a reduced sentence.

Last July, the informant, whose name was not released, befriended Mr. Defreitas, officials said. Mr. Defreitas said he recognized the informant from attending services at a Brooklyn mosque, took him into his confidence and slowly disclosed his plan to attack Kennedy, according to the complaint.

Though Mr. Defreitas had lived in Brooklyn and Queens, he told the informant that his resentment of the United States hardened into hatred during his years as a cargo worker at the airport.

"He saw military parts being shipped to Israel, including missiles, that would be used to kill Muslims," the complaint read. Mr. Defreitas, who

was secretly recorded by the informant, complained bitterly that he “wanted to do something” and that “Muslims always incur the wrath of the world while Jews get a pass.”

Mr. Defreitas envisioned “the destruction of the whole of Kennedy” and theorized that because of underground pipes, “part of Queens would explode.” He boasted that in addition to a huge loss of life — “even the twin towers can’t touch it,” he said — the attack would devastate the United States economy and strike a deep symbolic blow against a national icon, President [John F. Kennedy](#), officials said.

“Any time you hit Kennedy, it is the most hurtful thing to the United States,” he said in one of dozens of conversations secretly recorded during the 18-month investigation, according to the complaint.

“They love John F. Kennedy,” he said. “If you hit that, this whole country will be in mourning. It’s like you kill the man twice.”

Mr. Defreitas worked as a contractor at the airport from 1990 to 1993, said officials with the [Port Authority of New York and New Jersey](#), which runs the airport. Commissioner Kelly said he stopped working at the airport in 1995. The reason for the discrepancy was not clear.

In any event, the informant accompanied Mr. Defreitas on a series of trips between New York and Guyana, where the pair met with a number of co-conspirators, the authorities said. The group created code words like the “Chicken Farm” and “Chicken Hatchery” to refer to the plot.

As described in 33-page complaint, Mr. Defreitas seemed enraptured by the plot. He believed the informant had been “sent by Allah to be the one” and fantasized about the paradise that would await them after their martyrdom.

Mr. Defreitas was intent on meeting leaders of Jamaat al-Muslimeen to finance the plot, and another co-conspirator, Mr. Nur, agreed to help arrange the meeting. The group gained notoriety for the failed coup attempt, in which 24 people died, but today, officials said, it is known more as a street gang involved in drug trafficking. Authorities in the United States and Trinidad have closely watched the group’s activities since the Sept. 11 attacks, but in the United States it is not designated as a foreign terrorist organization.

A representative of Jamaat al-Muslimeen, who declined to be identified, said in a telephone interview from Port of Spain that the group would have no immediate comment on the allegations.

In January of this year, Mr. Defreitas was back in New York, and over the period of a week he and the informant visited Kennedy Airport four times — all the while being recorded, videotaped and followed by law enforcement authorities.

Mr. Defreitas pointed out fuel tanks on airport property, nearby gas stations, possible sites of lax security as well as possible escape routes, the authorities said.

Using video he shot at Kennedy, which he hoped would secure funds for the plot, Mr. Defreitas returned to Guyana in February and began meeting again with co-conspirators, including Mr. Kadir, who, along with being a former elected official, is an imam.

Mr. Defreitas and the informant traveled to Trinidad on May 20 and stayed for two days with Mr. Ibrahim; then, all three men met with Mr. Nur in a compound owned by a leader from Jamaat al-Muslimeen, the authorities said. That group was interested in the plot but first wanted to learn more about Mr. Defreitas and the informant. Mr. Ibrahim was worried about presenting the plan to the group, and advised Mr. Defreitas to present it instead to contacts overseas.

Mr. Defreitas agreed, and he and the source returned to New York on May 26.

Less than a week later, believing they had enough evidence for a successful prosecution, the authorities picked him up.

One friend of Mr. Defreitas's expressed shock at word that he had been arrested in a plot to attack Kennedy Airport. The friend, Trevor Watts, 65, described Mr. Defreitas as not dangerous.

"He's not that type of person," Mr. Watts said after learning of Mr. Defreitas's arrest. "He's not smart enough."

Mr. Watts said he first met Mr. Defreitas years ago, when both men lived on Albany Avenue in Brooklyn. Mr. Defreitas was working at Kennedy Airport at the time. His brother helped him land the job there, filling out his job application for him because Mr. Defreitas had trouble reading, Mr. Watts said.

Mr. Defreitas had been divorced and lost touch with his two children, Mr. Watts said. After leaving his Albany Avenue apartment, he moved from place to place and was homeless for a time, his friend said.

He also lived alone for several years in an apartment on North Conduit Avenue, near the airport. The daughter of his landlord described him yesterday as a "polite man" who always paid his rent on time. When he finally ended up leaving, he told the landlord that the weather was rough on his health and the cold was tough on his arthritis, the daughter said.

Mr. Defreitas was always thinking of ways to make money, Mr. Watts said. He had been in a car accident, and he spoke to Mr. Watts about his hopes of getting rich by winning a lawsuit. He sold books on a street corner in Queens and would ask his friends to give him their broken air-conditioners and refrigerators. He shipped the items to his girlfriend's sister in Guyana so she could repair and sell them, Mr. Watts said.

After coming home from a series of trips to Guyana, Mr. Defreitas started dressing in traditional Muslim clothes and referred to himself as Mohammed, said Mr. Watts, an auto mechanic.

Mr. Watts said Mr. Defreitas appeared to have adopted his fundamentalist beliefs only in recent years. He had previously embraced American culture, Mr. Watts said, and liked a particularly American brand of music, jazz, especially the saxophone.

In recent years, he lived in an apartment in a four-story building on Rockaway Avenue in Brooklyn, on a run-down block full of graffiti. Agents from the F.B.I.'s Joint Terrorism Task Force arrested Mr. Defreitas at the diner, on Linden Boulevard, about 10 p.m. on Friday.

"When he was picked up last night, he was playing the guessing game about who the informant was," a law enforcement official said yesterday. "He was cooperative at first, but he was not providing any information that we did not know."

When confronted by the authorities with information about the plot, however, Mr. Defreitas denied any involvement, the official said.

Though the New York area has been the subject of several terrorist plots, Commissioner Kelly said this one was different because it was largely developed in the Caribbean.

"This is an area in which we have growing concern and I think requires a lot more focus," Mr. Kelly said, echoing a concern law enforcement officials have reiterated in recent years.

According to The Trinidad Guardian newspaper, Guyana's president, Bharath Jagdeo, said yesterday that he was unaware of the details of the arrests but that on Friday, the United States ambassador, Roy Austin, requested a meeting with him. He said he learned from Mr. Austin that

Guyanese nationals were involved “in some plot at the J.F.K.,” but he said there was no Guyanese connection to the overall plot. He noted that Mr. Kadir was not a government official but was, until about two years ago, a member of parliament from the opposition party.

Asked whether he believed that West Indians traveling to the United States would be subject to greater scrutiny, Mr. Jagdeo said, “I hope there is no paranoia.”

“It’s not as if it’s a trend,” he was quoted as saying. “We are hoping there is no adverse reaction.”

Reporting was contributed by Ann Farmer, Manny Fernandez, Kate Hammer, Daryl Khan, Marc Lacey, Angela Macropoulos, Patrick McGeehan, Ray Rivera, Simon Romero and Nate Schweber.

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