

A 9/11 legacy: confusion over a name Czechs find error in tracking Atta

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PRAGUE -- Add one more country to the list of those decrying intelligence failures before the Sept. 11 attacks.

A lawmaker is leading calls for an investigation into why the Czech Republic's intelligence service had said that the hijackers' leader, Mohamed Atta, met in Prague with an Iraqi intelligence agent. That allegation is widely believed to be incorrect.

Shortly after the attacks in New York and Washington, Stanislav Gross, the current Czech prime minister who was then interior minister, announced that Atta had met in Prague in April 2001 with Ahmad Khalil Ibrahim Samir al-Ani, an alleged agent with Saddam Hussein's intelligence service. Gross based his assertion on information from the BIS, the Czech intelligence agency.

The allegation that Atta had huddled with one of Hussein's agents sparked headlines, led to speculation that Baghdad may have been involved in the attacks, and helped to fuel the case for a US-led war in Iraq.

But the bipartisan Sept. 11 Commission in the United States concluded in its final report that "the available evidence does not support the original Czech report of an Atta-al-Ani meeting." The commission's finding was the latest, and most authoritative, assertion that reports of the meeting were inaccurate and had been based on faulty intelligence.

In addition, press reports have suggested that a second man named Mohammed Atta (a Pakistani businessman who spells his first name with two m's) also traveled to Prague at about the same time as the Sept. 11 hijacker, confusing Czech authorities.

"It is in our interest to investigate this failure of Czech intelligence," Petr Necas, a leading member of the opposition Civic Democratic Party, said in an interview Friday.

An influential lawmaker specializing in military, law-enforcement, and intelligence issues, Necas said he is negotiating with other legislators to push the government for a formal inquiry.

The Czech government has not responded publicly to Necas's appeal for an investigation.

The controversy over the alleged meeting remains one of the most confounding episodes in the post-Sept. 11 narrative.

On Oct. 26, 2001, Gross said at a Prague news conference that Mohamed Atta, who was a student in Hamburg, traveled to Prague twice: on June 2, 2000, and on April 8, 2001. During the second visit, just five months before the Sept. 11 attacks, that he met with Ani, Gross said.

Ani's own history added to the air of intrigue. The second secretary of Iraq's embassy in Prague, Ani was expelled from the Czech Republic on April 22, 2001, after he was reportedly seen photographing the headquarters of the US-funded Radio Free Europe in central Prague.

Weeks after Gross's announcement, Milos Zeman, then the Czech prime minister, added to the confusion by telling CNN that Atta and Ani had met in Prague not to plan the Sept. 11 attack but to plot a raid on Radio Free Europe. Zeman retracted his statement days later, saying it was only a theory.

In the three years since Gross made his announcement, information has come to light that has cast doubt on its accuracy. Officials say evidence of the alleged meeting in April 2001 came from a single informant from Prague's Arab community who saw Atta's picture in the news after the Sept. 11 attacks, and who later told his handlers that he had seen him meeting with Ani. Some officials have called the source unreliable.

US officials have said their records -- including bank surveillance photos and cellular phone records -- place Atta in Virginia Beach, Va. and Coral Springs, Fla. in April 2001, around the time the alleged meeting with Ani allegedly took

place in Prague, according to the Sept. 11 report.

Nobody doubted that Atta was in Prague in June 2000. And although no one has alleged that he met with Ani at that time, his itinerary had seemed very suspicious.

Czech officials initially believed that the hijacker Atta had tried to enter the Czech Republic on May 30, 2000, but was turned away. He then flew back to Germany, got a Czech visa, and took a bus to Prague, arriving June 2. The next day he flew to the United States.

The fact that Atta would go through so much trouble to enter the Czech Republic for one day before flying to the United States struck many as an indication that he had business in Prague.

But last month the Chicago Tribune, citing law-enforcement sources, said that it was a different Atta -- the Pakistani businessman -- who tried to enter the Czech Republic on a flight from Frankfurt in late May, but was turned away because he lacked a visa.

On June 2, the hijacker Mohamed Atta, who had a visa, arrived in Prague by bus from Cologne, Germany, and flew to Newark the next day. Video surveillance cameras at a Prague bus terminal showed him playing slot machines at the station's Happy Days Casino before disappearing. ■