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Claim of terror camp in Bly explored

THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

GRANTS PASS, Ore. — Even in a town as small and out of the way as Bly, local folks find it hard to believe that Islamic militants might think they could train with assault rifles on a sheep ranch without anyone noticing. "Ridiculous," said Marilyn Thomas on Monday in a telephone interview. Thomas runs the Pit Stop convenience store in Bly, a tiny ranching community in the high desert of south central Oregon.

"I'm from Chicago, where I didn't even know my neighbors. Here they know what you're going to do before you do it. And if you don't do it they get mad."

A six-page complaint unsealed in a New York court alleges that Haroon Rashid Aswat, 30, a British-born citizen of Indian descent, spent a month at a sheep ranch outside Bly in December 1999 as a representative for a religious leader in London to see if it would serve as a base for training Islamic militants from London and the United States to fight in Afghanistan.

A fax outlining a recruiting brochure for the camp said people could train in "Archery, combat, martial arts and rifle and handgun handling," according

to the complaint.

Authorities have said the camp never materialized beyond a dozen people taking target practice in a cinder pit, and was abandoned for unknown reasons.

Aswat is the fourth person arrested in connection with the camp. The complaint does not identify the religious leader who sent him from London or his contact in Seattle, but closely tracks charges brought against Muslim cleric Abu Hamza Al-Masri and James Ujaama of Seattle. Ujaama pleaded guilty to lesser charges and authorities have said he agreed to cooperate in the investigation.

Aswat is accused of violating a federal law prohibiting conspiracies and preparations for killing, kidnapping and maiming people or damaging property in a foreign country.

Bly is an unincorporated town of a few hundred people located 50 miles east of Klamath Falls. Its name comes from the mispronunciation of an Indian word for a place where two rivers come together. The high school closed in 1968, and the town has been struggling to survive since a lumber mill shut down about 20

years ago.

Though a few miles outside town, the ranch is near a highway and surrounded by scattered rural homes, making it unlikely that sustained assault rifle fire could go on without someone taking notice, Bly residents said. They took notice in 1999 when people in Middle Eastern dress living at the ranch came to town.

An unidentified witness cooperating with prosecutors who was promoting the training camp idea to an unidentified religious leader in London described Oregon in a fax as a state that supported militia activity and firearms, and "looks just like Afghanistan," according to the complaint.

Aswat was taken into custody in Zambia last month, where he had been detained in connection with the July 7 bombings in London. British officials want to question him about 20 phone calls reportedly made on his South African cell phone to some of the four suicide bombers who killed 52 people in the attack.

He was brought back to London over the weekend, and a judge on Monday ordered him to remain there until Thursday pending an

extradition request from U.S. authorities. His lawyer has proclaimed Aswat's innocence.

In the New York complaint, FBI Special Agent Michael S. Butsch, a member of the Joint Terrorist Task Force in New York, cites witnesses who saw Aswat at the sheep ranch in December 1999 and one who sent a fax to the religious leader in London.

"We can build a big following and practice our deen to the fullest even taking some of the external pressure off the backs of our brothers abroad," the complaint quoted from the fax.

The complaint alleges that Aswat was a follower of an unnamed religious teacher in London, and flew with another follower to New York on an Air India flight, then took a Greyhound bus to Seattle, where they met up with the man proposing the camp and traveled to Bly.

Aswat had expertise in combat training, had previously been in a jihad training camp in Afghanistan and once saw Osama bin Laden, the complaint said.

The fax called on the religious leader to move to the camp, saying he could not be removed "without a serious armed fight."

Group readies eminent domain initiative

THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

SALEM, Ore. — Voters in 2006 could be asked to limit the government's power to take private property.

Oregonians in Action, the state's leading property rights group, filed paperwork Tuesday with the state elections office for a November 2006 ballot measure that would allow governments to condemn property only if they plan to use it themselves — not turn it over to private developers.

The issue gained national attention in June when the U.S. Supreme Court ruled local governments can force owners to sell land for economic development projects that benefit the public.

The proposed initiative needs 75,630 signatures to make the ballot.

"We want to nip it in the bud before it becomes a problem here," said David Hunnicutt, director of Oregonians In Action. "People want to feel somewhat secure they're not going to have their property taken because the local government decides another business would be a better use."

Hunnicutt's group scored a major victory in the November 2004 election, when its Measure 37 was backed by 61 percent of voters.

The measure allows property owners affected by land use restrictions that were passed after they

bought the property to either ask for an exemption from the rules, or compensation for any loss in property value that was caused by the regulations.

The condemnation issue is unlikely to be as contentious. Land-use planning advocate 1000 Friends of Oregon is fine with limiting condemnation power — depending on the details, director Bob Stacey said Tuesday.

The initiative would protect homes, businesses, farms and forests from condemnation for private projects. Governments could still buy land for utilities or transportation facilities that are privately operated.

Legislators considered similar bill in the session that ended last week. The bill cleared the House, but senators said the issue needed more deliberation.

"It was too complicated, too late," said Sen. Charlie Ringo, D-Beaverton.

Legislators who supported the condemnation bill are likely to campaign for it during election season. Rep. Wayne Krieger, R-Gold Beach, said he doesn't want private companies pressuring government officials for land.

"It's a horrible situation to put these people in," Krieger said. "We need to stop it, and we were in a position to do that."

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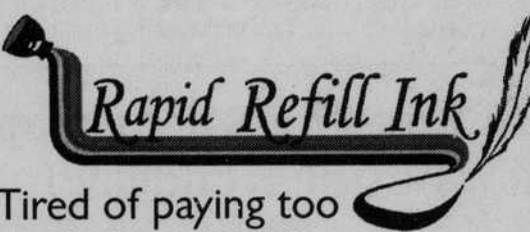
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