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Hill panel finds CIA not guilty in Beirut car bombing

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STAT Stephanie L. Nail
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The CIA was not guilty of any direct or indirect complicity in the March 8 car bombing in Beirut that killed 80 people, according to the House Intelligence Committee.

A report, approved by the committee June 12 but not released until Friday, said that a review of files, intelligence documents and interviews with intelligence officials

"uncovered no evidence that any U.S. intelligence agency — any U.S. government agency — has encouraged or participated in any terrorist activity in Lebanon. Further, the committee was able to discover no evidence that any U.S. intelligence agency had foreknowledge of the March 8 bombing outside the residence of Sheik Hussein Fadlallah."

The alleged CIA link to the car bombing has been mentioned by radical Shi'ite Moslems as one of the

reasons they hijacked TWA flight 847 10 days ago and took American passengers hostage — killing one of them.

Sheik Fadlallah, the target of the bombing, escaped unharmed and is believed to be holding at least some of the hostages taken from the airplane.

Allegations of an indirect role in the bombing attack by the CIA was first mentioned in a May 12 article in The Washington Post. The Post said the

CIA had an indirect connection to the car bombing and quoted a Lebanese intelligence source as saying that the CIA knew the car bombing was being planned.

The story also said that President Reagan approved a covert operation directing the CIA to train and support several counterterrorist units for strikes against suspected terrorists.

It said in part: "... members of one of those units, composed of Lebanese intelligence personnel and other foreigners, acting without CIA authorization, went out on a runaway mission and hired others in Lebanon to detonate a massive car bomb outside the Beirut residence of a militant Shi'ite leader believed to be behind terrorist attacks on U.S. installations, the sources said."

Yesterday, the Post published a letter from CIA official George Lauder criticizing the May 12 story. In a separate article, the Post quoted two unnamed committee members as saying that the panel's report did not directly address the Post story.

However, the committee said in its report that the review followed press allegations that the CIA had been authorized to train and support counterterrorist units of foreigners and that its purpose was "to determine whether or not any evidence existed to support the charge that the United States Government, and specifically the Central Intelligence Agency, knew about beforehand, or was in some way responsible for, a March 8, 1985, bombing in Beirut."

"How could anyone say the report was not done because of the Post article?" Rep. Henry Hyde, R-Ill., said yesterday. "I don't understand that."

"The Post was wrong," Mr. Lauder said Friday. "I told [Post editor and writer] Bob Woodward that the story was wrong, but they ran it anyway."

After the May 12 article ran, the CIA publicly denied "any connection" with the terrorist act. In his letter to The Post, Mr. Lauder said the Post article "gave the American public and the rest of the world the false impression that the U.S. government was involved in terrorist activity. This misleading theme has been picked up by other journalists as fact and has even been cited by the Shi'ite terrorists as one of the motives for the hijacking of TWA Flight 847."

CIA spokeswoman Kathy Ferson said yesterday the agency "hopes that the committee report will set the record straight. We deny the implication that the CIA had anything to do with the March bombing. But that denial didn't seem to make any difference to what people thought — as evidenced by the statement from the hijackers.

"The story left quite an impression around the world and it is an impression that's not correct."

Some terrorism experts have expressed the belief that the hijacking of a TWA airliner is the first major terrorist action directed against Americans following reports of alleged CIA involvement in

training Lebanese counterterrorists.

During the first Beirut stop of the jetliner, the hijackers read a statement over the plane's radio which, among other demands, included a condemnation of U.S. Mideast policy. The statement specifically condemned a March 8 car bombing in Beirut that killed 80 people at a building known to be a center for radical Shi'ite Muslims.

Samuel Francis, a former staff member of the Senate Judiciary Subcommittee on Security and Terrorism and an aide to Sen. John East, R-N.C., said it was possible the hijacking was partly the result of the Post story.

"Three weeks ago, Islamic Jihad made a statement that they plan to target more Americans," Mr. Francis said. He said that decision may have been sparked by reports of alleged CIA activities in Lebanon.

Yonah Alexander, a specialist on international terrorism at the Georgetown University Center for Strategic and International Studies,

said there is some validity to the argument that allegations linking the CIA to a Beirut bombing contributed to an increase in terrorist actions against Americans.

"Clearly, it is revenge against the United States," Dr. Alexander said.

Dr. Alexander pointed out that after the bombing, a banner was draped from the building which read, "Made in America."

At the time of the May 12 Post story, an administration source told The Washington Times that the article had endangered the lives of Americans in the Middle East.

"The Washington Post has put the lives of every American in Lebanon in jeopardy. ... I find it utterly contemptible. ... It invites retaliation against every American in Beirut — including women and children," another administration source said at that time.

Immediately following the story, the State Department alerted U.S. diplomatic outposts worldwide of possible terrorist actions in response to the May 12 Post report. A State Department source said a message was sent under "standard notification procedures" urging U.S. officials to be wary of retaliatory attacks.

Bill Gertz contributed to this report.