

Anthrax scare raises issue of Dangerous Availability of Toxins

By Stephanie Simon=(c) 1998, Los Angeles Times

There's a lot of hate talk swaggering through certain corners of society these days. Talk about taking down the government.

So when the FBI seized anthrax from two men in Las Vegas last week, experts who follow American extremist movements blanched.

That anthrax turned out to be a harmless veterinary vaccine. But as scientists point out, the real stuff is frighteningly easy to get. Other toxins are, too.

And while the Las Vegas case was a false alarm, experts believe biological weapons may well be attractive to a small cadre of home-grown terrorists who think they can save the nation only by striking out -- with horrific drama -- against a government they feel is corrupt.

"The threat is here. The threat is real," said Robert Blitzer, chief of the FBI's domestic terrorism unit. "A couple of guys with a lot of hate can get together" on the Internet and make a biological poison. "That's what scares us more than anything else."

Guns and homemade bombs will continue to be the weapons of choice for most terrorists, authorities say.

But most anyone with a bit of ingenuity and some biology know-how can obtain lethal toxins -- and grow them in the kitchen. What's more, the microbes can be transported in a test tube, tucked away in a shirt pocket or briefcase. They won't set off metal detectors or raise alarms at airport security controls.

"It becomes very, very difficult to control the movement of these organisms," said David Huxsoll, a former commander of the U.S. Army's effort to develop defenses against biological weapons. "If someone is really bent on getting them, it's fairly easy."

Deadly anthrax microbes, for instance, can be scraped off the flesh or extracted from the blood of animals infected with the disease. The microbes can even be scooped up from the ground -- if an infected cow dies, for instance, the spot where it falls may crawl with anthrax for decades.

Anthrax, which surfaces occasionally in animals in the United States and more frequently in other countries, is a lethal bacteria that can kill humans in even microscopic amounts.

Even more simple to obtain -- and even more toxic -- is ricin, an extract of the castor bean plant. In 1995, four members of the Minnesota Patriots Council were convicted of conspiring to kill federal agents by smearing the deadly powder on doorknobs. They had accumulated enough ricin to murder 1,400 people.

The threat is real enough that the National Defense Panel urged the Pentagon in November to put more resources into defending against terrorist attacks at home -- attacks that could come from international hitmen or homegrown extremists.

Huxsoll knows and fears both brands of terrorists. He has served on three international inspection teams to scour Iraq for weapons of mass destruction, but he knows not all deadly caches are overseas. As the Las Vegas anthrax saga unfolded, he found himself wondering just what domestic terrorists could be cooking up in their kitchens. "It's something we really have to be concerned about," he said.

In fact, law enforcement officials have been concerned for years.

That's why FBI agents moved so quickly against Larry Wayne Harris, the Ohio microbiologist who allegedly boasted to an informant that he had enough anthrax to wipe out Las Vegas.

Harris had been convicted in 1997 of fraudulently obtaining bubonic plague -- yet another toxin that authorities believe is easy to get and thus tempting for use in domestic terrorism. Harris also had boasted to a university professor last summer that he could take out 100,000 people by spewing anthrax from a crop duster plane.

So when the FBI's tipster mentioned Harris in connection with anthrax last week, agents swarmed in to arrest him and seize biological materials. The Las Vegas charges against Harris were dropped Monday, but the FBI's domestic terrorism chief remained wary.

"It just scares the hell out of you," Blitzer said. "You just cannot ignore the fact that we're moving toward the millenium and there's a lot of nut-heads out there."

Law enforcement officials and academic experts are not willing to estimate how many would-be terrorists are trying to concoct biological weapons to use against their own country. All they can say -- and say with alarm -- is that such activity is going on.

"Without a doubt," said Brian Levin, director of the Center on Hate and Extremism at Stockton College in New Jersey. "I guarantee you."

Many authorities speculate that the biggest terrorist threat comes from right-wing extremists. But that's a frustratingly vague description. It encompasses dozens of different phi-

losophies, from the survivalist theories of militia members to the racist rantings of white supremacists.

The one thing that binds these diverse groups together is suspicion -- in particular, an intense suspicion of the federal government. "They see a government plot to destroy liberty and impose tyranny," said Chip Berlet, a senior analyst with the Political Research Associates think tank outside Boston.

"From their point of view," they're going up against this sinful, evil bureaucracy ... so destroying it is an act of patriotism."

Indeed, spokesmen for the militia movement have repeatedly and emphatically insisted they have no interest in terrorism. "How can we recruit our fellow Americans if we're out there maiming and killing them?" asked John Trochmann of the Militia of Montana. "We do not advocate any kind of violence. We advocate putting our nation back together."

The problem, experts say, is that the fierce anti-government rhetoric underpinning such groups may inspire more radical members to take matters into their own hands -- no matter how often their leaders publicly renounce violence.

Chuck Fenwick, a former military medic who teaches survivalist techniques, points to a recent newsletter he received from one militia group announcing that its members had been approached by someone "who advocates that 'patriots need biological (weapons) capability' which he can help them obtain."

The newsletter advises members to turn down such offers by saying, "I

have no intention of doing that. I don't think you should, either." But Fenwick said that rather tepid rejection by the militia leadership seems unlikely to deter a member bent on carrying his group's philosophy to its logical, if bloody, conclusion.

"I consider this a major threat," he said.

Even more of a threat are the loners who don't belong to any group -- but who absorb the extremist movement's rhetoric over the Internet, at survivalist expos, on shortwave radio and through videos. Authorities cite Oklahoma City bomber Timothy McVeigh and convicted Unabomber Theodore Kaczynski as examples of loners with deadly ideologies.

"You don't need a mass movement," said Rabbi Abraham Cooper, who tracks extremist movements at the Simon Wiesenthal Center in Los Angeles. "You just need a couple of people who are tuned in and turned on by this stuff. Reading it all gives them a sense of empowerment and community."

Those are just the people the FBI is most concerned about, because, by definition, they're much harder to track. They also may hold the most hard-core views, and may be most intent on making a splash with a new kind of weapon. After all, to put it crudely, 20 deaths from anthrax would be a lot more horrifying than 20 deaths from yet another pipe bomb explosion.

"You usually think of terrorists wanting the big bang of fire, smoke and visible damage," Huxsoll said. "But once they see the reaction to biological event, terrorists will be turned on by it. ... We're going to have copycats all over the place."

DEA names leaders of new drug trafficking groups

By Laura Brooks and Douglas Farah=(c) 1998, The Washington Post

BOGOTA, Colombia _ In testimony before the U.S. Congress last fall, James S. Milford, then acting deputy administrator of the Drug Enforcement Administration, named the following people as the leaders of new drug trafficking organizations:

-Orlando Gamboa, "the Snail," who runs "the most powerful organization on the North Coast. Gamboa exploits maritime and air routes to the Dominican Republic, Haiti, Puerto Rico and other Caribbean islands to smuggle multi-ton quantities of cocaine ... to the United States."

-Arcangel and Orlando Henao, brothers "who run the most powerful of the various independent traffick-

ing groups that comprise the North Cauca Valley drug mafia."

Orlando Henao was arrested last month but is being held only on charges of "illicit enrichment," not drug trafficking. Illicit enrichment charges rarely yield convictions.

-Julio Cesar Nassar, who "heads a major 'polydrug' trafficking and money-laundering organization based out of Colombia's North Coast."

-Diego Montoya, who "heads a North Cauca Valley trafficking organization that transports cocaine base from Peru to Colombia and produces multi-to-quantities of cocaine to export to the United States and Europe. DEA considers Montoya to be one of the most significant cocaine traffickers in Colombia today."

California stores can be sued for tobacco sales to kids

By Maura Dolan=(c) 1998, Los Angeles Times

SAN FRANCISCO _ The California Supreme Court ruled Monday that private individuals and companies may sue stores for selling cigarettes to minors.

The court, in a 6-to-1 decision, found that a 1930s unfair competition law allows consumers to act as prosecutors and bring lawsuits to enforce criminal and civil laws.

The decision came in a case over the illegal sale of tobacco to minors, and anti-smoking advocates praised it as a useful tool in combating teenage smoking.

The case, however, could have impact beyond tobacco by keeping alive a bodof lawsuits in which citizens or private for-profit corporations have been filing consumer suits over alleged legal violations by businesses. Such suits have rapidly multiplied during the past decade, and business lawyers until now had been able to persuade some trial judges to limit them.

Public-interest groups had urged the court to uphold the right of citizens to file such suits, arguing they are needed to fight unfair business practices. But business organizations Monday complained the ruling will lead to more costly litigation against retailers and other businesses.

"You can wind up subject to one of these suits for pretty modest mistakes," said Fred Main, general counsel for the state Chamber of Commerce.

The decision will spark more lawsuits against stores for selling tobacco to minors, he predicted, say-

ing that "it has potentially a large impact."

Stanton Glantz, a professor of medicine at the University of California, San Francisco, called the decision "an important development."

"The governor isn't particularly being very aggressive in allowing the health department to enforce the state laws restricting sales to kids," said Glantz, a member of an oversight committee for the state's tobacco control program. "So this will mean you can have citizen enforcement, which is good."

Under the law, a plaintiff can seek restitution, which could be paid to the state or to some other third party. In a tobacco case, the restitution itself would probably be limited to the amount of money a store made selling tobacco to minors.

The real incentive for a lawyer to bring such a case, however, is that the business that is sued can be forced to pay the lawyer's fees and expenses.

That prospect drew the attention of the one justice who dissented.

Justice Janice Rogers Brown called the smoking case a "poster child ... for abusive litigation" and expressed hope the Legislature will change the law to prohibit such lawsuits.

"Selling cigarettes to minors is against the law, and those guilty of it should be punished," she said. "The creation of a standardless, limitless, attorney fees machine is not, however, the best way to accomplish that goal."

The court ruled in favor of San Francisco Bay Area lawyer Donald P. Driscoll, who has filed several

Marching on sin at Rio's Carnival

By Anthony Faiola=(c) 1998, The Washington Post

RIO DE JANEIRO, Brazil -- Behind a backdrop of electrifying floats toting nearly naked men painted gold and buxom women in costumes that would make a Las Vegas showgirl blush, Lazaro Silva, 28, stands on a stage opposite the Carnival parade route, preaching the word of Jesus.

Like thousands of other evangelists who have converged on the world's largest and most carnal bash in record numbers this year, Silva and his group of 400 Christian soldiers are on a mission to tap one of the largest concentrations of their target audience: "sinners" of every sort.

"What better place to find the kind of people we need to reach than the people who come to Carnival in Rio?" asks Silva, leader of the evangelical group Youth on a Mission, when asked why the saintly are now flocking to Sodom in such startlingly high numbers for the four-day Carnival that precedes Ash Wednesday. "It is where we are most needed."

This year, the extravaganza of Rio de Janeiro's Carnival has taken on a decidedly new and bizarre twist. It has evolved into a magnet for thousands of Protestant evangelists who, with quixotic logic, are streaming in from as far away as Europe and Asia, bent on converting an unrepentant lot of locals and tourists who seem quite content and guiltless about their unabashed debauchery.

The growth of evangelism during Carnival, ranging from shrill preachers to far more shrewd organizations that put on their own very successful -- and fun -- neighborhood festivals of music and dance with religious themes, underscores life in the "new Brazil," where Protestant evangelical denominations have made massive inroads in the world's largest Roman Catholic country.

The Catholic Church, although issuing occasional criticism, has largely steered clear of the sacred cow of Carnival. But the high-energy evangelists are taking advantage of an opportunity the way Weight Watchers might target all-you-can-eat buffets. And with these folks, you can bet that when the Girl from Ipanema goes walking, everybody prays.

"Why have just four days of joy in Carnival when you can have a lifetime of happiness with Jesus?" shouts Silva from his stage. But in sultry Rio, where shipments of 100,000 condoms were stolen just before Carnival began and now are likely being put

to the test in every corner of the city, the preachers have their work cut out for them. As Silva preaches onstage, his workers hand out religious fliers in an attempt to corner the human tableau of elaborately costumed folk -- from feathered transvestites to drunken, 300-pound women in gold lame bikinis, all streaming toward Rio's Sambadrome.

The Sambadrome is the very heart of Carnival, the downtown street theater where this city's "samba schools," or neighborhood dance associations, try to outdo one another with the most sensual, theatrical and best choreographed parade. Although the themes of the Carnival '98 parades have never been more serious -- from police brutality to social inequities -- the costumes and behavior of the crowd and participants appear as traditionally sinful as ever.

In the riot of color and tropical-night heat, Alenira Moreira Santos, 31, who came from a distant state in northwestern Brazil to spread the gospel during Carnival, approached a woman in a leopard bikini with red and black feathers springing from her buttocks. Moments before, the scantily clad woman was getting up-close and personal with a male friend in the street. Moreira tried to hand a prayer card to the leopard woman, Katia Rodrigues Teixeira, 37, but she refused to accept it.

"It's the most ridiculous thing I've ever seen," said Teixeira, a Rio physical education teacher dancing in one of the samba schools. "Carnival is about release. It's about happiness and fun. Church has no place here. This is our time. ... They should just leave us alone."

Certain things are happening this year, however, that have led a few to question whether divine intervention is at work. On Friday the 13th, only days before the opening of Carnival, Rio's major domestic airport -- situated on the waterfront, a perfect spot for tourists to catch a glimpse of the glory of this stunning city's lush mountains and packed beaches -- was destroyed by a freak fire apparently caused by a short circuit. That forced all flights to land at an international airport, a half-hour from the city.

In addition, heavy rains attributed to El Nino left some neighborhoods knee-deep in water, and massive power outages have wreaked havoc on hotels and travel agents trying to manage the millions of hedonistic tourists.

lawsuits seeking more than \$40 billion from hundreds of Northern California retailers, primarily small, independent stores, that he said sold tobacco to minors.

Many of the retailers have paid Driscoll small settlements, but Lucky Stores decided to fight it out. The 1994 suit against Lucky charges that its stores and about 400 other small markets committed unfair business practices by selling tobacco to youths under the age of 18

and was incorporated by his law office. The suit seeks \$10 billion, but Driscoll said he meant to ask for \$1 billion and made a "typo" in the filing of the court papers.

"Let a court decide how much restitution," he said. "I am convinced retailers are doing a whole lot of damage to kids in this state, and I think a court will agree with us."

Driscoll represents a for-profit group called "Stop Youth Addiction," which is headed by his mother

and was incorporated by his law office. The Supreme Court appeared to try to distance itself from Driscoll's case even while giving him a victory. The majority opinion noted that Driscoll used unlawful methods to gather evidence -- sending minors into stores to buy cigarettes -- and brought the lawsuit for his own financial gain.

"These are important concerns,"

wrote Justice Kathryn Mickle Werdegar for the court. She added, however, that the court was ruling only on whether such a lawsuit was valid under the law, "not the seemliness of (the) litigation strategy or (the) counsel's motives."

The court has no power to rewrite the law, Werdegar said, adding that the Legislature "remains free" to change it.