



Attacks on UK will continue, radical cleric says

By Gideon Long

LONDON, July 22 (Reuters) - Militant Islamists will continue to attack Britain until the government pulls its troops out of Iraq and Afghanistan, one of the country's most outspoken Islamic clerics said on Friday.

Speaking 15 days after bombers killed over 50 people in London and a day after a series of failed attacks on the city's transport network, Sheikh Omar Bakri Mohammed said the British capital should expect more violence.

"What happened yesterday confirmed that as long as the cause and the root problem is still there ... we will see the same effect we saw on July 7," Bakri said.

"If the cause is still there the effect will happen again and again," he said, adding he had no information about future attacks or contacts with people planning to carry out attacks.

Bakri, a Syrian-born cleric who has been vilified in Britain since 2001 when he praised the September 11 hijackers, said he did not believe the bombings and attempted attacks on London were carried out by British Muslims.

He condemned the killing of all innocent civilians but described attacks on British and U.S. troops in Muslim countries as "pro-life" and justified.

In an interview with Reuters, Bakri described Osama bin Laden, leader of the radical Islamist network al Qaeda, as "a sincere man who fights against evil forces".

Bakri said he would like Britain to become an Islamic state but feared he would be deported before his dream was realised.

"I would like to see the Islamic flag fly, not only over number 10 Downing Street, but over the whole world," he said.

A hate figure for the British tabloid press, the bearded and bespectacled Bakri said Islam contained "a message of peace for those who want to live with the Muslims in peace".

"But Islam is a message of war for those who declare war against Muslims," he said.

"I condemn any killing and any bombing against any innocent people in Britain or abroad, but I expect the British people to condemn the killing of Muslims in Iraq and Afghanistan."

However, asked about Islamist attacks on British and U.S. troops and on Israelis, he said: "If violence is pro-life I don't condemn it".

Britain has around 1,100 troops in Afghanistan and 8,500 in Iraq. Prime Minister Tony Blair supported the United States in its respective invasions of both countries in 2001 and 2003.

Bakri, a 46-year-old father of six, was born in Syria and lived in Lebanon and Saudi Arabia. When the Saudi government expelled him in 1985 he came to London.

Nicknamed "The Tottenham Ayatollah" after the area of north London in which he lives, he has infuriated many Britons with his firebrand speeches and refusal to condemn suicide bombings.

He founded the British branch of Hizb ut-Tahrir, which describes itself as a non-violent political party dedicated to creating an Islamic caliphate centred on the Middle East.

But he split from the group in 1996 and set up al Muhajiroun, which won notoriety in 2001 for celebrating the attacks on the World Trade Center and Pentagon which killed nearly 3,000 people.

Bakri has Syrian and Lebanese citizenship and says he thinks the British government might deport him to one of those two countries in the wake of this month's bombings.

"But I think that would be political suicide for the British government if they started to deport and imprison all extremists and radicals," he said.

"Because if, God forbid, something happened again, they would have nobody left to blame."

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