

Videos spark terror fears;
Suspect held after taping Sun Belt sites

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Body

A Pakistani man was charged Tuesday with federal immigration violations in Charlotte **after** being picked up for videotaping skylines and transportation systems in several **Sun Belt** cities, including Atlanta.

Justice officials said they are investigating suspicious **tapes** shot by Kamran Shaikh, also known as Kamran Akhtar, who allegedly spent several months with his camera in Charlotte, Atlanta, New Orleans, Dallas, Houston and Austin, Texas.

When arrested, Shaikh was found to have other **videos** which included footage of Atlanta's skyline, shot from the city's MARTA system; Houston's downtown trolley and transit center; and trolley cars in Dallas and New Orleans. It also included footage of the Mansfield Dam on Lake Travis near Austin, the Texas governor's mansion, the Texas state Capitol and downtown Austin buildings.

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Charlotte-Mecklenburg police picked up Shaikh, 35, a native of Pakistan, on July 20 **after** he was spotted videotaping two financial buildings in downtown Charlotte: the headquarters of Wachovia Bank and Bank of America, two of the nation's largest financial institutions.

Shaikh is charged with violating immigration and naturalization laws and making materially false statements, said a news release from U.S. Attorney Gretchen Shappert. He faces a detention hearing Friday.

Shaikh, a native of Karachi who has been in custody since July 20, first told authorities that he was in the United States with a green card, or alien residency card, but later admitted he did not have one, according to a U.S. District Court affidavit released Tuesday.

The North Carolina Joint Terrorism Task Force is investigating the videotapes. The case comes on the heels of a heightened **terror** alert for financial buildings in New York, Newark and Washington, based on detailed intelligence that al-Qaida may have been surveilling the buildings.

The discovery of Shaikh's **tapes** has generated discussion among law enforcement agencies in the cities involved, though officials would not comment on plans to beef up security measures.

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MARTA shown tapes

According to a criminal complaint filed by the U.S. attorney's office, Shaikh was seen by a Charlotte-Mecklenburg police officer videotaping the downtown area of Charlotte.

In a court affidavit, federal immigration agent John Scott Sherrill said Shaikh's videotapes included footage of the Bank of America building and the Wachovia building where the local FBI office is located.

MARTA officials said the Atlanta FBI office showed them the tape last week.

Assistant Chief Wanda Dunham of the MARTA police said the video does not contain footage of the MARTA system but shows the Atlanta skyline shot from a MARTA station and train.

She said one picture of the skyline was shot from the northbound platform of the West End station. Another was shot through the window of a MARTA train, she said.

Dunham said it was unclear where the footage from the train was shot, but she said it was obvious it was taken from a MARTA train because the interior of the car was reflected on the window.

"He didn't film the MARTA train; he didn't film inside of any station. He was just filming the Atlanta skyline," Dunham said. "He was focusing in on tall buildings and tourist attractions."

Dunham said she didn't know which buildings or tourist attractions.

She didn't see the video herself, but said she was briefed Friday on its contents after a MARTA lieutenant assigned to a joint terrorism task force viewed it. She said four MARTA majors then viewed the footage Monday at FBI headquarters in Atlanta.

Atlanta FBI spokesman Steve Lazarus said his agency would not comment on the investigation and referred inquiries to the U.S. attorney's office in Charlotte. A spokeswoman for the U.S. attorney there said she could not comment on the videotape "or any other evidence in this ongoing investigation.

"I will have to refer you to the affidavit by the agent and the release issued by the U.S. attorney's office," Suellen Pierce said when asked if other sites in Atlanta were shown on the videotape.

Atlanta Police Sgt. John Quigley said police were made aware of the video and, "We're acting on information that was shared. We are making folks aware in Atlanta who need to know."

Lisa Ray, spokeswoman for the Georgia Department of Homeland Security, said the office was contacted last Friday by the U.S. Department of Homeland Security and the FBI Joint Terrorism Task Force. She would say only that that information was "shared with the proper agencies.

"We have no specific threats to our state," Ray said. "There are no known threats associated with the video."

But she said, "This is a good example that we can't let our guard down."

In Washington, Homeland Security officials said Director Tom Ridge would not comment on the case.

Charlotte Mayor Pat McCrory said this incident demonstrated how beefed-up training for the city's police officers in the wake of the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks has paid off.

"I am very pleased our police officers made the arrest," McCrory said. "Videotaping typically nontourist destinations is out of the ordinary."

No one answered the door Tuesday at the New York address given for Shaikh, but his name was printed above an apartment mailbox in the Elmhurst section of Queens.

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On his blue apartment door on the third floor of a three-story brick walk-up, a worn sticker of a smiling M&M cartoon figure said "welcome" from above a peep hole.

Suspicious officer

On July 20, Charlotte-Mecklenburg Officer Anthony D. Maglione was patrolling downtown Charlotte when he spotted Shaikh standing on a street corner videotaping. According to the court affidavit, Maglione slowed down to take a closer look when Shaikh lowered his camera and started walking away.

Maglione asked Shaikh what he was doing, and Shaikh replied he was going to the bus station. Maglione became suspicious, however, because Shaikh was walking in the wrong direction.

When Maglione questioned him about the video camera, Shaikh told him he was taping the skyline for his brother, according to the affidavit.

When he was taken to the local FBI for questioning, Shaikh initially told Sherrill he obtained a green card in 2002 and that he had entered the United States by illegally crossing the border from Tijuana, Mexico.

Asked about Shaikh's arrest during a visit to Atlanta, former U.S. Rep. Timothy Roemer (D-Ind.), a member of the 9/11 commission, said he had few details about the case but noted that al-Qaida operatives have considered a variety of targets, from shopping malls and sporting events to downtown office towers.

"We certainly know about how al-Qaida has changed. Al-Qaida has become more nimble, agile and less centralized," he said. "They're looking at different types of targets."

"The threat has changed over time. The American people need to be vigilant about that threat," he said.

Roemer said the arrest underscores the need to enact some of the 41 recommendations his commission made in an effort to counter the threat posed by al-Qaida.

--- Staff writers Bill Torpy, Ty Tagami, Mark Bixler, Don Plummer, Teresa Borden and David Ho contributed to this article. Material from the Austin American-Statesman was also used.

Graphic

Photo: Kamran Shaikh, a Pakistani, was charged in federal court in Charlotte on Tuesday, after authorities found he had made suspicious tapes of financial institutions and other sites in Atlanta, Charlotte, New Orleans and Texas. / TODD SUMLIN / Charlotte Observer

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