Terrorists raise cash by selling antiquities

By LAURA DE LA TORRE

Terrorist organizations may be financing their deadly activities partly by dealing in the illicit trade of art and antiquities which come out of the Middle East and wind up in the homes of collectors who pay top dollar for ancient artifacts, experts have told GSN.

Despite the efforts of the U.S. Government and the international community to choke off various financial sources for worldwide terrorist organizations, the continuing trade in antiquities remains difficult to stop.

Antiquities looted from Iraqi museums in 2003, and still missing, are believed to be valued very high. Such ancient artworks can fetch big bucks which may then be used to fund terrorism.

Airborne video over Iraq to spot insurgents placing IEDs

By JACOB GOODWIN

The U.S. military is planning to fly high resolution video surveillance cameras miles above Baghdad and other Iraqi cities in order to capture images of insurgents placing improvised explosive devices (IEDs) alongside roads, so that after a deadly explosion actually occurs, U.S. officials will be able to review the video and “back track” to identify the attackers who placed the IED, the route they drove to the roadside site, and the terrorist cell or base of operations from which they traveled.

“Serious Games” are now aiding cyber security gurus

By DAVID BATES

Computer game producers are devoting some of their talent and technology to better prepare the nation for terrorist attacks, be they cyber or physical.

Several computer game design firms unveiled their latest security-related offerings at the Serious Games Summit held in Washington last fall.

Law enforcement is turning to cell phone forensics

By SARAH LITTMAN

The use of cell and PDA-based “smart” phones is ubiquitous, from business executives conducting international transactions on a BlackBerry to teenagers sending text messages to a friend across the room. These days, having a cell phone isn’t just about making voice calls. With rapid advances in storage capability and processing power, mobile communication devices provide a wide array of functionality ranging from a digital organizer to a low end computer, complete with Internet access, e-mail and online gaming, all in the palm of your hand.

How to prepare for a natural or manmade disaster

By STEVEN LEWIS

Many organizations make the recovery process harder for themselves — or even impossible — by not planning ahead for disaster recovery. While they may take steps to try to prevent disasters, they ignore the reality that prevention won’t always work.

Creating a disaster recovery plan can seem overwhelming, given the complexity and demands of even the smallest organizations. We have found it helpful to keep the following points in mind as you proceed.
Atta asked about peddling antiquities

have made their way to the black market. The enormous cultural wealth that exists in countries like Iraq and Afghanistan -- coupled with political unrest and warring factions -- leaves many rare antiquities vulnerable prey to looters and smugglers who have discovered the art market.

Terrorists, like any other criminal organization, have begun to take advantage of this illicit marketplace. As a result, they are not only gaining money, but they are also helping to destroy history. Artifacts ripped from the ground without adhering to any archaeological process can lose context and, thus, their scholarly value.

The illicit art and antiquities trade is an age-old problem dating to ancient Greece and before. It was continued in Nazi Germany, with the IRA and with Saddam Hussein’s regime. Under Saddam, Iraq’s archaeological sites were ruthlessly protected. Iraq’s collection became world renowned, attracting archaeologists and art historians from around the world, despite embargoes placed on the country. With Saddam’s removal, museums and cultural sites were subject to looting. Artifacts were smuggled out of the country, often to countries such as Switzerland.

Though export and import restrictions exist, they do little to prevent thousands of objects from flowing across international borders everyday, with few problems. Hundreds of tons of cargo pass across borders, and organic materials often are not detectable. Iraqi cylinder seals, for instance, which are the size of a person’s thumb, can fetch upwards of $500,000 apiece.

The U.S. National Central Bureau of INTERPOL states on its Web site that “the annual dollar value of art and cultural property is exceeded only by trafficking in illicit narcotics, money laundering and arms trafficking.” However, the illicit trade of antiquities is often overlooked in war-torn countries, such as Iraq, as a mere side effect, and little media attention has been focused on the illicit trade’s possible ties to terrorism.

In July 2005, a German newspaper, DerSpiegel, reported that 9-11 ringleader Mohammed Atta approached a professor at the University of Göttingen in Germany and asked about selling artifacts Atta said he could procure in Afghanistan. Der Spiegel reported that when Atta was asked why he wanted the money, Atta said he wanted to buy a plane.

“…”This story is not mere idle gossip, it was included in a letter to Congressman Clay Shaw [R-FL] of the House Ways and Means Committee by Archeological Institute of America (AIA) chairman James Wright,” said Cindy Ho, president and founder of the non-profit organization, Saving Antiquities for Everyone (SAFE).

The organization was founded after the looting of the Iraq Museum in an effort to curb the illicit antiquities trade and preserve the country’s cultural property, primarily by raising public awareness.

“We’ve done a good job of cutting off traditional terrorist funding,” said Colonel Matthew Bogdanos, of the U.S. Marine Corps. “As a result, transnational terrorists are forced to find other sources of funding.”

After 9/11, Bogdanos was recalled to active duty to lead a counter-terrorism operation in Iraq, before investigating the looting of the Iraq Museum, along with a team partly comprised of agents from the Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE).

Though Bogdanos will not confirm any direct links between the illicit antiquities trade and terrorist organizations (because he is still on active duty with a top-secret security clearance), he nonetheless suggests the strong possibility that criminals and rare antiquities go hand-in-hand.

“We are finding weapons and antiquities,” Bogdanos said.

The connection between antiquities and terrorists was further confirmed in December 2005, when Bogdanos wrote in an article in The New York Times, “Things have become even more troubling -- when tracking down terrorists, we now find antiquities. In a series of raids in June in northwest Iraq, for instance, marines arrested five terrorists in underground bunkers filled with automatic weapons, ammunition stockpiles, black uniforms, ski masks, night-vision goggles and 30s, cylinder seals and statuettes that had been stolen from the Iraq Museum.”

Cindy Ho compared current looting to earlier periods and concluded that recent looting has reached unprecedented levels. She views the thefts from Iraq as a wake-up call to a more severe problem.

“…”According to estimates published by the Archeological Institute of America (AIA), contractors pay looters in Iraq $10 million to $20 million each year for artifacts that fetch upwards of $100 million on the black market,” Ho told GSN in an e-mail. “The AIA estimates 100,000 to 150,000 tablets and cylinder seals are looted from Iraq each year. Many of them wind up on Ebay.”

ICE, the primary investigative arm in the U.S. involved with antiquities, undertakes cultural property investigations both domestically and abroad. Though ICE officials will not confirm or deny the link between antiquities theft and terrorism until it has been substantiated by an investigation, ICE Senior Special Agent James McAndrew, like Col. Bogdanos, acknowledges the strong possibility.

“I think it’s definitely possible without a doubt and probably more than likely probable,” said McAndrew, who has helped seize or repatriate manuscripts, Indian Buddha’s, an Iranian silver rhyton, and objects from Yemen, Peru, Mexico, Russia and Germany.

According to Arthur Brand, a coin collector and self-proclaimed art investigator, connecting the dots between Taliban-controlled Afghanistan and Hezbollah-controlled Lebanon and stolen antiquities is common knowledge among collectors and dealers.

“The obvious link is when a hundred thousand people in the United States buy antiquities coming out of the Iraq, Iran, Lebanon and Pakistan,” Brand said. “Nine out of 10 artifacts that come out of the Middle East are controlled by Hezbollah and Islamic Jihad.”

Though Brand’s numbers cannot be confirmed, his ability to move within the art world makes him more knowledgeable about the underground art world than some law enforcement authorities. As a non-threatening art collector, Brand has been able to infiltrate the art world in ways that law enforcement cannot emulate, he says.

“[Dealers and collectors] are not bank robbers,” Brand said. “We are talking about people who can speak seven languages, have university degrees and are highly intelligent.”

His naming of American corporate CEOs and government officials whom he says are connected to the illicit trade may leave him sounding like a conspiracy theo-
fnding and repatriating objects. “Technology is able to monitor the art market like never before. Technology safeguard and restricts criminals ability to sell,” said Dick Ellis, of Swift-Find, the newest of the online databases. Swift-Find hopes to create an international database open to both the private and public sectors, bridging the gaps that currently exist between countries and law enforcement agencies.

Ellis brings his own expertise to Swift-Find. He started the Art and Antiquities Squad at New Scotland Yard, was the general manager of Christie’s Fine Art Security Services and is a member of UNESCO’s panel of experts on the protection of cultural property. Ellis is convinced that registries like Swift-Find are the best way to stop the illicit buying and selling and, hence, the looting of art and antiquities.

Once an object is documented and identified, it is difficult to sell on the open market. Of course, this poses the potential problem that the object might go underground forever, but Ellis feels that the objects will eventually resurface. “The first Gulf War in 1991 made the possession of Iraqi objects a criminal offense, and so they are staying underground and being stockpiled in Jordan, Syria and Switzerland,” said Ellis. “They will resurface in a few years when everyone has forgotten about UN resolutions and the Iraq war.” Ellis plans to be there when they do.