

[Europeans Refuse to Play Bin Laden Deadline Game](#)

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By Mark Trevelyan, Security Correspondent

LONDON (Reuters) - An ultimatum from Osama bin Laden to European governments will expire this week, but security officials say they do not see it as an immediate trigger for fresh attacks.

Instead, they believe Islamist militants will try to strike whenever they have the means and the opportunity -- irrespective of the declared deadline -- and will use bin Laden's warning to the Europeans to justify an attack.

In an audiotape broadcast by two Arabic television stations on April 15, the al Qaeda leader offered a "truce" to European governments if they pulled out their troops from Iraq and Afghanistan.

"I offer a truce to them (Europe) with a commitment to stop operations against any state which vows to stop attacking Muslims," bin Laden said in a recording which CIA officials said they believed to be genuine.

He set a three-month deadline, presumed to expire on Thursday.

Among European governments, Italy -- which has almost 3,000 troops in Iraq -- has expressed the loudest public concern.

**'TAKING THREAT SERIOUSLY'**

"We are taking the threat seriously. There is special attention. We have singled out 14,000 sensitive targets being guarded by the forces of law and order," Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi said this month when asked about the deadline.

But security experts said the extra attention has not translated into a slew of new protective measures, since Italy has been on high alert for months. "This is not the first threat Italy has had to face, so mechanisms are already there," a police source said.

Other countries have played down the significance of the deadline, insisting that security levels are already high and do not need stepping up further.

"We have been on maximum alert this whole time ... This is the game that the terrorists play and what we should not do is play their game. Their goal is to divide us. We should not enter into this game," French Interior Minister Dominique de Villepin told reporters during a visit to Spain this week.

In Germany, an Interior Ministry spokesman said: "There are no insights that give us reason to tighten security."

A senior European intelligence source told Reuters that while there were no signs of preparations for an attack on July 15 or soon after, it was likely that militants would use the rejected bin Laden deadline to "legitimize" future strikes.

By this logic, attacks would be justified on the basis that the al Qaeda leader had magnanimously offered his enemies a chance for peace, and had been spurned.

"The ultimatum was not a peace offer but a justification for attacks that could come in the future," said Brussels-based security analyst **Claude Moniquet**. "It can offer a 'judicial framework' for attacks."

He cited two Iraq-linked factors -- NATO's agreement to help train Iraqi security forces and prospective European Union assistance in preparing elections there -- as offering further incentives for Islamist militants to target Europe.

**SORRY "IF YOU ARE AMONG THOSE KILLED"**

In a July 1 email, a militant group claiming links to al Qaeda said bin Laden's offer had only days to run, and told Europeans: "Do not blame us for what will happen and we apologize to you in advance if you are among those killed."

While intelligence officials dismissed the group as lacking credibility, it served to focus attention on the deadline.

A British security source said militants might use it as "an inspiration to reinvigorate actions."

"We are already on a high state of alert and we will continue to be so," the source said. "The threat from international terrorism is ever present, regardless of deadlines."

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