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Thursday September 11, 8:27 PM

Bin Laden tape is old material - French expert

PARIS (Reuters) - A leading French terrorism expert cautioned on Thursday against taking the latest Osama bin Laden video at face value, saying it was largely an edited collection of old footage and sound tracks that have already been aired.

On Wednesday, the Al Jazeera Arabic television station broadcast a tape of bin Laden and his right hand man Ayman al-Zawahri, in which the al Qaeda leader urges supporters to bury Americans in "the graveyard of Iraq."

But Roland Jacquard, head of the Paris-based International Observatory on Terrorism, told French radio that the tape was above all a show of defiance on the eve of the September 11 anniversary by al Qaeda number two al-Zawahri.

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"We have to be extremely prudent about this message," Jacquard told Europe 1 radio.

"Given that Osama bin Laden has not appeared on a video cassette for many months it's pretty incomprehensible that in the only video cassette where he appears beside Ayman al-Zawahri he doesn't speak, he just allows the latter to speak.

"The voice of bin Laden we hear in the background, thanking the World Trade Center plane hijackers, is exactly the same message that was broadcast in a video cassette by Al Jazeera on 26 December 2001," he said.

Al-Zawahri's message was also old and had been broadcast by Dubai's Al Arabiya network on August 3, Jacquard said.

"Above all (this is) a message from the organisation's number two, al-Zawahri, who wants to remind the world and the United States on September 11 that he's still around," he added.

Jacquard said some of the bin Laden pictures may even date from before the December 2001 offensive in Afghanistan's Tora Bora mountains, where U.S. warplanes and their Afghan allies tried to wipe out bin Laden and his associates.

Nevertheless, the latest al-Zawahri soundtrack was recent, as he refers to recent events. But the pictures were old, the French expert said.

Other analysts have said the film appeared to have been taken in April or May.

Despite a massive manhunt launched in the wake of the September 11 attacks that killed more than 3,000 people, bin Laden has evaded capture and is believed to be still alive.

Jacquard said U.S. forces had launched a secret mission in Afghanistan's southeastern Zabul region, where the al Qaeda leader is protected by a local tribe. He said its chief is a major drug trafficker and one of bin Laden's personal doctors.

"(Bin Laden) is probably also protected by Pakistani (secret service) agents who financed him for many years, because each time a military operation is launched in a village where bin Laden is thought to have stayed, he always leaves this place a few days beforehand," Jacquard said.

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