

‘White Widow’ paid for SA passport



September 29 2013

By Agiza Hlongwane and Jeff Wicks

Samantha Lewthwaite.

The world’s most wanted woman – British citizen and terror suspect Samantha Lewthwaite – paid R20 000 for fake South African documents in a process that was organised and executed in Durban, The Sunday Independent can reveal.

Durbanite Ehmed Chisty, serving time for passport fraud, has confessed that he sold, with the help of corrupt officials in the Department of Home Affairs, the illegal documents to Lewthwaite who, on Friday, was placed by Interpol on its most wanted list. She is being sought for her alleged involvement in the shooting at Westgate Mall in Nairobi, Kenya, which left more than 67 people dead.

The Sunday Independent traced Chisty to the Westville Prison yesterday. He confirmed that:

n He met Lewthwaite in 2005 and bought the fake passport for her. He pocketed R5 000 and R15 000 went to the corrupt Home Affairs officials, two of whom he identified by name.

n Lewthwaite wanted and secured fake travel documents for herself and her two children.

In an exclusive interview in prison, Chisty, a 60-year-old convicted fraudster serving a 37-year jail term at Westville for passport fraud, yesterday lifted the lid on the inner workings of a multi-million rand South African-based racket that helped thousands of Islamist militants get their travel documents.

Among those assisted were Lewthwaite and her two children. Chisty, a former Montclair resident, said he had worked in cahoots with another wealthy Durban businessman to process more than 3 000 fraudulent IDs and passports for mostly Al-Qaeda-linked networks such as Al-Shabaab and Soldiers of Islam.

Wheelchair-bound after allegedly being assaulted by the police, and now confined to a low care hospital ward at the prison’s Medium B section, Chisty said he felt “personally responsible” for the attacks.

Sporting a huge beard, Chisty positively identified Lewthwaite from a photograph presented to him and said she was one of the many clients whose names he had written in a diary, which was seized by police when he was arrested.

Interpol issued an international arrest notice at Kenya's request for the 29-year-old Lewthwaite, dubbed the "White Widow" as reference to her marriage to one of the suicide bombers who killed 52 people in London's July 2005 terror attacks.

There has been widespread speculation over her role in Nairobi's deadly siege last Saturday, although there is no concrete evidence.

Chisty recalled meeting Lewthwaite in 2005 before facilitating the issuing of her documents.

"I remember her, that's her. She approached me in 2005 and I later went to her house in Randburg. She needed a full set of documents for her and her two children. We did the application through four officials in the Durban office and it was processed in Pretoria. She paid the normal price, R20 000 for each document. The way it worked was that R15 000 would go to each Home Affairs official involved, who would then split it with colleagues, and I'd pocket R5 000.

"It pains me to see innocent people being killed like this," he added. "I cry for them. I just think if I hadn't helped her, none of these people would have been killed. It's all because of me."

He claims that in the days leading up to the bloody raid on the mall, he had been tipped off that terrorists were "moving in" on Nairobi. His efforts to warn NPA staff in Pretoria went unheeded.

A police crime intelligence insider, who could not be named, said this week that fraud and corruption at Durban's Home Affairs office had been repeatedly identified.

"In two risk assessment reports that were compiled ahead of the 2010 Soccer World Cup, rife corruption at the Durban office was flagged as a valid terrorist threat.

"South Africa and specifically Durban were identified as a launch-pad for terrorists entering the country and moving across its borders. The fact that forged documents are so readily available makes their passage even simpler," he said.

Last year the US State Department issued the Country's Report on Terrorism, which identified widespread travel document fraud in South Africa as a danger for other African states.

It detailed how South Africa had recently taken steps to address document fraud and border security vulnerability.

These steps include the upgrading of passport security measures and a watertight accounting system to thwart corrupt officials. South Africa participated in the Department of State's Anti-terrorism Assistance programme, attending courses on Maritime Interdiction, Explosive Ordinance and Forensics, Land Border Interdiction, Management of Special Events, Document Fraud, and Crime Scene Management.

"Unfortunately, South African attendance at these courses was plagued by poor participation and its attendees were often unaffiliated with counter-terrorism activities," the report said.

Home Affairs Minister Naledi Pandor confirmed this week that there has been an investigation into how Lewthwaite obtained her ID and passport, but that it had been two years ago. Her spokesman Ronnie Mamoepa yesterday would not confirm if a task team has been established to investigate issues around Lewthwaite.

"Yes, there has been an investigation. The matter of the holder of this South African passport in the name of a South African, Natalie Webb, was investigated and reported upon in 2011. This is an old matter which has now been revived in very interesting ways in the media with a great deal of speculation. The passport was cancelled at that time because it was identified as being fraudulently acquired. The passport itself was genuine, but they used the identity of a South African in order to acquire a South African passport," said Pandor.

Pandor said she was aware that Lewthwaite lived in South Africa at some point.

However, she said that she was not aware if Lewthwaite's passport was lost or not, saying it was no longer a legal travel document and had been cancelled.

“If it comes up in South Africa or anywhere in the world, due to interactions we have had with Interpol, the Kenyan authorities and the UK authorities, it would not be regarded as a legal travel document.”

On why it was so easy for alleged terrorists to get access to South African passports, especially the new passports with recently introduced high-tech security measures, Pandor said she did not think it was easy.

“It might have been at the time, but I think we have changed both the process of application as well as the character of the passport. As far as I am aware, up to today, all South Africans are able to travel without (difficulty) and are getting through ports of entry as they travel. I have not received any complaints up to now.” – Additional reporting by Nathi Olifant