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April 30, 2006

## E-mail tactic tied to Madrid bombings

Suspect says messages on plans were saved as drafts to prevent government tracking

By Renwick Mclean  
The New York Times

MADRID, Spain -- One of the leading figures indicted in the March 11, 2004, train bombings in Madrid used a simple trick that allowed him to communicate with his confederates on ordinary e-mail accounts but still avoid government detection, according to the judge investigating the case.

Instead of sending the messages, the man, Hassan el Haski, saved them as drafts on accounts he shared with other militants, said papers issued by the judge, Juan del Olmo.

They all knew the password, so they could access the accounts to read his unsent notes and post replies the same way, the judge said. This way, the notes left less of a digital trail that the government could track.

Intelligence officials have said in the past that some terrorist groups were using the method, which investigators call a "virtual dead drop."

But few concrete examples had come to light until now, and its possible use in such a major attack, along with the wide circle of contacts that Haski maintained, officials say, raises the possibility that it is much more widespread among terrorists than previously thought.

Few details of this use of e-mail accounts were given in a lengthy indictment that was released to news organizations this month and that named 29 suspects, most of them North African, in connection with the Madrid attack.

But because of testimony from one of the suspects in the Madrid bombings, the government now contends that such shared accounts were apparently used by the conspirators as early as late 2003.

"This is probably a common method of communication among jihadists in Europe," said Javier Jordan, the director of the Center for Security Studies and Analysis at the University of Granada.

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