

German firm probes final World Trade Center deals



German computer experts are working round the clock to unlock the truth behind an unexplained surge in financial transactions made just before two hijacked planes crashed into New York's World Trade Center on September 11.

Were criminals responsible for the sharp rise in credit card transactions that moved through some computer systems at the WTC shortly before the planes hit the twin towers?

Or was it coincidence that unusually large sums of money, perhaps more than \$100 million, were rushed through the computers as the disaster unfolded?

A world leader in retrieving data, German-based firm Convar is trying to answer those questions and help credit card companies, telecommunications firms and accountants in New York recover their records from computer hard drives that have been partially damaged by fire, water or fine dust.

Using a pioneering laser scanning technology to find data on damaged computer hard drives and main frames found in the rubble of the World Trade Center and other nearby collapsed buildings, Convar has recovered information from 32 computers that support assumptions of dirty doomsday dealings.

"The suspicion is that inside information about the attack was used to send financial transaction commands and authorisations in the belief that amid all the chaos the criminals would have, at the very least, a good head start," said Convar director Peter Henschel.

"Of course it is also possible that there were perfectly legitimate reasons for the unusual rise in business volume," he told Reuters in an interview.

Profiting from disaster?

"It could turn out that Americans went on an absolute shopping binge on that Tuesday morning. But at this point there are many transactions that cannot be accounted for," Henschel said.

"Not only the volume but the size of the transactions was far higher than usual for a day like that. There is a suspicion that these were possibly planned to take advantage of the chaos."

Nearly 3,300 people were killed in the attacks that destroyed the World Trade Center. Some 30,000 people in the buildings, symbols of America's financial might, were able to escape between the time the planes crashed and about an hour later when they collapsed -- even though many of the unmanned computers continued working.

The United States blames the Al Qaeda group led by Saudi-born Osama bin Laden for the attack and has since waged war on the Taliban regime in Afghanistan that sheltered them.

Advance knowledge of attack?

There are several data retrieval companies in the United States and Europe, but Convar said it has won the lion's share of the contracts from the World Trade Center because of its laser scanning technology.

Convar developed the laser scanner two years ago that made it possible to retrieve data from badly damaged computers.

With a staff of 30 in its high-security facility in Pirmasens near the French border, the firm has worked with the US armed forces in Germany as well as German federal police for the last 15 years.

Its offices in Pirmasens, a town of 36,000 still suffering from the departure of some 4,000 American soldiers stationed here during the Cold War, are closely guarded behind high fences and monitored by dozens of security cameras.

Inside the building, an endless series of code-operated door locks keeps unwelcome visitors away. In the centre of the facility is a 120 square metre (1,292 square foot), dust-free "clean room" where the damaged computer drives are coaxed back to life.

Citing client privacy, Henschel declined to say which companies Convar is working for, or provide details about the data retrieved so far. But he said the raw material, up to 40 gigabytes per computer hard drive, is sent immediately by satellite or courier back to New York.

Money trail

Richard Wagner, a data retrieval expert at the company, said illegal transfers of more than \$100 million might have been made immediately before and during the disaster.

"There is a suspicion that some people had advance knowledge of the approximate time of the plane crashes in order to move out amounts exceeding \$100 million," Wagner said. "They thought that the records of their transactions could not be traced after the main frames were destroyed."

The companies are paying between \$20,000 and \$30,000 for each computer recovered, Henschel said.

The high recovery costs are one reason why only a limited number of hard drives are being examined. Convar has turned down a request by one British newspaper to try to recover personal last hour e-mails sent by someone trapped in the doomed building.

Henschel said the companies in the United States were working together with the FBI to piece together what happened on September 11 and that he was confident the destination of the dubious transactions would one day be tracked down.

"We have been quite surprised that so many of the hard drives were in good enough shape to retrieve the data," he said.

"The contamination rate is high. The fine dust that was everywhere in the area got pressed under high pressure into the drives. But we've still been able to retrieve 100 percent of the data on most of the drives we've received.

"We're helping them find out what happened to the computers on September 11 as quickly as possible. I'm sure that one day they will know what happened to the money."