Two car bombs found in London

The junction of Coventry Street and Haymarket in central London is cordoned off as police officers investigate a 'viable explosive device'. Photograph: Clara Molden/PA

Scotland Yard confirmed tonight that a second car bomb had been found in central London close to the first car bomb that was discovered outside a packed nightclub in the early hours.

Senior police and Whitehall sources said that the failed attempt to inflict mass murder in the capital was the work of al-Qaida or those inspired by its ideology.

"You only have to read past cases of those convicted for terrorism to realise they have been plotting to blow up nightclubs and putting gas cylinder bombs in cars," one senior source said.

Counter-terrorism sources said the devices found in two Mercedes cars - which contained gas cylinders, petrol and nails - were similar to car bombs used in Iraq.

The first device was found overnight in Haymarket - one of London's main nightlife districts.

That Mercedes had been left outside the Tiger Tiger club, near Piccadilly Circus, which had hundreds of people inside. More were milling around on the street.

Peter Clarke, the Scotland Yard head of counter-terrorism, confirmed in a short statement at 8.45pm that a second Mercedes also had a "considerable amount" of explosive material and nails.

The second car was found in nearby Cockspur Street, just a few hundred yards for the first and the two were "clearly linked", he said.

The discovery of a second device increased the need for the public to be vigilant, Mr Clarke said.

The incident began when an ambulance was called to a nightclub at around 1am to treat a person who had fallen ill. The ambulance crew noticed a Mercedes parked outside the club, and saw that the vehicle appeared to have smoke inside it.

Witnesses said they had seen the light metallic green saloon car being driven erratically earlier. It then crashed into bins before the driver ran away.

A parking ticket was put on the second car at 2.30am and it was impounded an hour later at a lot. The device was made safe by specialist officers, Mr Clarke said.

Security services and police have been trying to boost the intelligence they have about violent extremists, but this attempted attack was "off the radar".

"There is no intelligence whatsoever that we were going to be attacked in this way," Mr Clarke said.

The police presence in the capital has been increased and the security alert has caused traffic problems in some central areas.

"At this stage, we are deploying an enhanced level of patrolling in key areas in central [London](#) and across the capital," a police statement said.

"This is to provide a visible reassurance, and is not in response to any specific threat."

Mr Clarke, speaking at an earlier press briefing this morning, said: "Even at this stage, it is obvious that if the device had detonated there could have been serious injury or loss of life. It was busy, and many people were leaving nightclubs."

He said police had gathered CCTV evidence, but added that it was too early to speculate about who was responsible.

No warnings were received. The first car was seen being loaded on to a lorry and taken away. Its most likely destination was the forensic explosives laboratory at Fort Halstead, in Kent, the site of a specialist facility known as the Igloo.

The security scare poses an early test for the new prime minister, Gordon Brown, and his home secretary, Jacqui Smith.

Cobra, the government's emergency response committee, met this morning to discuss the situation.

Amid speculation that the bomb had been timed to coincide with the changeover of government, Mr Brown said the alert underlined the continuing threat to Britain.

"The first duty of the government is the security of the people, and as the police and security services have said on so many occasions, we face a serious and continuous threat to our country," he said during a visit to a school in north London.

"We should allow the police to investigate this incident and then report to us. But this incident does recall the need for us to be vigilant at all times and the public to be alert at any potential incidents.

"I will stress to the cabinet that the vigilance must be maintained over the next few days."

Speaking outside 10 Downing Street, Ms Smith said the UK faced a "most serious and sustained threat" from terrorism.

She stressed that the bomb could have caused "significant loss of life" if it had exploded.

"We can never completely eliminate risks but the government, police and security services are all doing everything possible to protect the public," she told reporters on her first full day in the post.

Ms Smith spent the morning chairing the Cobra meeting before attending a cabinet session.

The defence secretary, Des Browne, told BBC Radio Scotland: "It does appear to be a very serious incident.

"My first reaction to this is, thank God that we have police and explosives experts who can make these devices safe, and that nobody has been injured."

Earlier this year, the Metropolitan police commissioner, Sir Ian Blair, warned that what is happening on the streets of Baghdad - where car bombs explode frequently - could eventually reach London.

It emerged that anti-terrorist police last month spot-checked lorries on the outskirts of the city amid growing fears that extremists would use a bomb in a vehicle.

It is almost two years since four suicide bombers brought carnage to London's transport network, killing 52 people, on July 7 2005. The current threat level for terrorism in the UK, set by MI5, is "severe" - meaning an attack is likely. It is just under "critical", the highest level of alert, and it is not yet known whether the level will change in light of today's events.

Senior police sources have stressed they have no direct intelligence that any group or individual is planning such an attack on London.

Online-Technology.co.uk – 3 Key Points

- Make staff aware of the danger, i.e. Argus and Griffin training
- Know how to respond to armed incidents, i.e. Government "Run, hide, Tell" guidelines
- Identify secure areas, i.e. Security policy