

"U.S. Aides Cite Worry on Qaeda Infiltration From Mexico"

By DOUGLAS JEHL FEB. 17, 2005

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WASHINGTON, Feb. 16 - New intelligence information strongly suggests that Al Qaeda has considered infiltrating the United States through the Mexican border, top government officials told Congress on Wednesday. In a wide-ranging assessment of threats to American security, including those posed by Iran and North Korea, the officials also said intelligence indicated that terrorist organizations remained intent on obtaining and using devastating weapons against the United States.

"It may only be a matter of time before Al Qaeda or another group attempts to use chemical, biological, radiological and nuclear weapons," Porter J. Goss, the new director of central intelligence, told the Senate Intelligence Committee.

The warnings from Mr. Goss and other top officials came as part of a stark presentation that described terrorism as the top threat to the United States despite what they described as successes in the last year. Mr. Goss said that the war in Iraq had served as a useful recruiting tool for Islamic extremists, and that both the low Sunni Muslim turnout in elections there and the violence that followed demonstrated that the insurgency remained a serious threat. He warned that anti-American extremists who survive the war were likely to emerge with a high level of skills and experience, and could move on to build new terrorist cells in Saudi Arabia, Jordan and other countries.

Intelligence that "strongly suggests" that Al Qaeda operatives have considered using the Mexican border as an entry point was cited in written testimony by Adm. James M. Loy, the deputy secretary of homeland security. But he wrote that there was "currently no conclusive evidence" that this had succeeded.

In the past, law enforcement officials have said Al Qaeda might try to use the Mexican border, but the testimony on Wednesday seemed to suggest increasing concern. In response to questions from the senators, Admiral Loy described it as a "very serious situation," while Robert S. Mueller, director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation, listed first among his current concerns what he said might already be "the threat from covert Al Qaeda operatives inside the United States."

"Finding them is the top priority for the F.B.I., but it is also one of the most difficult challenges," Mr. Mueller said. He said covert operatives could include "a true sleeper operative who has been in place for years," or someone who entered the country recently.

In his written testimony, Admiral Loy cited recent information from investigations and detentions as the basis for his concern about the Mexican border. He added,

"Several Al Qaeda leaders believe operatives can pay their way into the country through Mexico and also believe illegal entry is more advantageous than legal entry for operational security reasons."

The appearance by Mr. Goss was his first in public since he took over as intelligence chief more than four months ago. In response to a White House deadline, he also sent a classified memorandum to President Bush on Wednesday with recommendations about how to improve the C.I.A.'s abilities, particularly in clandestine intelligence gathering.

Among related recommendations, aides to Mr. Goss said, is the view that the C.I.A. should retain its ability to conduct paramilitary operations, despite a recommendation last summer from the Sept. 11 commission that such roles be transferred to the Department of Defense. A joint review by the C.I.A. and the Pentagon concluded that both agencies should have paramilitary abilities, officials said.

In questioning Mr. Goss about the possibility that terrorists might use nuclear weapons, Senator John D. Rockefeller IV of West Virginia, the top Democrat on the intelligence committee, called attention to a report sent to Congress in November by the National Intelligence Council that addressed the security of Russian nuclear facilities and military forces.

Among other things, the report expressed concern about the total amount of nuclear material that could have been diverted or stolen from Russia since the breakup of the Soviet Union in 1991. It said the Russian authorities had twice thwarted attempts by terrorists to conduct surveillance on nuclear weapon storage facilities in 2002, and cast doubt on Russian assurances that weapons-grade nuclear material lost from Russian arsenals had been traced and returned.

"We find it highly unlikely that Russian authorities would have been able to recover all the material reportedly stolen," the intelligence council said in the report. Mr. Goss said in response to a question from Mr. Rockefeller that "there is sufficient material unaccounted for so it would be possible for those with know-how to construct a nuclear weapon."

David Johnston and Eric Schmitt contributed reporting for this article.