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FBI Director Orders Probe Into Zacarias Moussaoui Case

Aired May 24, 2002 - 10:02 ET

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CAROL COSTELLO, CNN ANCHOR: Tough questions and startling accusations echo within the FBI. Its director, Robert Mueller, has ordered a probe into the agency's handling, some would say mishandling, of the case of Zacarias Moussaoui.

The man now charged in the September 11 attacks was in custody, but largely under the radar before the hijackings. CNN's Jeanne Meserve joins us with the latest. Good morning.

JEANNE MESERVE, CNN CORRESPONDENT: Good morning, Carol. The current furor started with a letter about a dozen pages long sent by Colleen Rowley, the general counsel for the FBI field office in Minneapolis, Minnesota to FBI Director Robert Mueller and certain members of Congress. Rowley would not reveal its contents, but told CNN, quote, "I had to do what I believed was right."

It is characterized by congressional sources as a whistle-blower communication which lays out complaints about how FBI headquarters handled the investigation of Zacarias Moussaoui and how FBI officials have represented that investigation in recent public statements. "Time" magazine's Web site quotes the letter as saying the FBI has fostered, quote, "a climate of fear which has chilled aggressive FBI law enforcement action/decisions."

Rowley's letter is so hot that last night, FBI Director Robert Mueller announced an internal investigation. In a statement, he said: "While I cannot comment on the specifics of the letter, I am convinced that a different approach is required. There is no room after the attacks for the type of problems and attitudes that could inhibit our efforts."

Moussaoui was arrested in mid-August in Minneapolis on immigration charges after raising suspicions at a Minnesota flight school. Investigators believed he was supposed to be the 20th hijacker on September 11, and he has been charged with conspiracy, though not

directly linked with the September 11 attacks.

After his arrest, the Minneapolis FBI office requested permission from FBI headquarters to seek a warrant to search his computer. That request was denied. According to congressional sources, Rowley lays out this and other specifics, and according to one senator, takes issue point by point with the FBI director in a manner the senator characterized as, quote, "devastating." The "Time" magazine Web site quotes Rowley as saying senior officials, quote, "omitted, downplayed, glossed over and/or mischaracterized the Minneapolis investigation of Moussaoui.

Here is what Mueller had to say about Moussaoui's arrest on the eighth of this month at a congressional hearing.

(BEGIN VIDEO CLIP)

ROBERT MUELLER, DIRECTOR, FBI: So, red flags went up. The agent in Minneapolis did a terrific job in pushing as hard as he could to do everything we possibly could with Moussaoui. But did we discern from that that there was a plot that would have led us to the September 11? No. Could we have? I rather doubt it.

(END VIDEO CLIP)

MESERVE: An hour from now, Senator Bob Graham and Congressman Porter Goss will announce that their special committee looking into 9/11 and what went wrong will hold its first public hearing during the week of June 3, immediately after the congressional Memorial Day recess. The Moussaoui case, how it was handled, and how it has been explained is expected to be one aspect of their probe, and this letter is sure to be examined -- Carol.

COSTELLO: And it should be interesting to see what it says in its entirety, if we ever get to see that. Thank you, Jeanne Meserve, reporting live from Washington today.

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