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Want to help the victims of terrorism?

Text: Justice Department Briefing

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Following is the transcript of remarks by Attorney General John Ashcroft and FBI Director Robert Mueller on seeking increased law enforcement powers to investigate terrorist crimes.

ASHCROFT: The investigation into Tuesday's attack is still moving vigorously. I want to express my appreciation to thousands of agents and support staff of the Federal Bureau of Investigation who are literally working 24 hours a day, seven days a week, following leads in the investigation. Their work has been excellent. I join the American people in thanking them for their dedication to the country.

A number of tips and potential leads coming into the FBI have been very substantial. We've received helpful leads from both the 1-800 number and the web site and are grateful for the American people in their participation in this investigation to date.

To date, the hotline has received more than 7,700 phone calls, the web site 47,000 potential leads. Let me repeat, those two resources are important for us and for the public. Any member of the public that has information that may be helpful to the investigation, please call, 1-866-483-5137. The toll free calling number is, 1-866-483-5137. Or you can reach at the Internet, at www.ifbcccfb.gov.

In an effort to assist the FBI with manpower, I have directed the U.S. Marshals Service to assign more than 300 deputy marshals to provide needed assistance to FBI field offices.

These deputy marshals will be assigned to the various locations across the country to augment and enhance the ongoing investigation and the responsibility we have.

While the FBI has always had a law enforcement presence in the air, the Department of Transportation has decided to expand our country's law enforcement capacities in that respect. Each day, as flights increase, we



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will be adding additional enforcement officials from the Department of Justice as air marshals on planes in addition to the already heightened security on the ground in airports. These additional law enforcement officials from various federal agencies are being assigned to the FAA to ensure aircraft passenger safety.

Yesterday I met with several members of the House and Senate leadership, including the leadership of the Intelligence and Judiciary Committees. FBI Director Mueller and I discussed with them the current threat assessment, including our belief that associates of the hijackers that have ties to terrorist organizations may be a continuing presence in the United States. This threat assessment has helped us to identify several areas where we should strengthen our laws to increase the ability of the Department of Justice and its component agencies to identify, prevent and punish terrorism.

The meetings we had were very productive. And I'm optimistic that we will be able to act quickly to provide law enforcement with the additional tools that are necessary to fight terrorism. I was encouraged by the members support and their pledge to work as members of the Congress with the Department of Justice to move this agenda of anti-terrorism legislation forward.

In the next few days, we intend to finalize a package of legislative measures that will be comprehensive. Areas covered include criminal justice, immigration, intelligence gathering and financial infrastructure. While the final details are still being discussed, I can highlight a few of the items that we will address in the proposal.

Under intelligence gathering, we want to provide additional tools to collect intelligence on terrorists, including expanded electronic surveillance, search authority and the ability to identify, cease and forfeit terrorist assets.

Two specific changes we have proposed include: First, current law requires us to obtain a wiretap for a phone number. It does not allow us to obtain a wiretap authority for an individual. Well, with the advances in technology, we need to make sure that our laws are also advancing. We're proposing that we provide wiretaps so that you can assign the wiretap to the individual, so that we can gain intelligence from individuals who use multiple telephones and changing cellular phones that move around with individuals.

You understand that assigning the authority only to the hardware means that when a person changes hardware, we lose our capacity to surveil. And given the nature and availability of literally disposable telephones in modern society, we need to be able to have the court authority to monitor, not the phone, but the telephone communications of a person and to have that authority stay with the person.

Second, current law requires that we obtain a separate wiretap in each jurisdiction of the country where an investigation is being pursued. We would like to change the law so that one wiretap approval can be obtained for all jurisdictions working on an investigation, particularly given the mobility of individuals and the capacity of individuals who are mobile to communicate. This is a reasonable upgrade in our opportunity to help us curtail and combat the threat.

I want to assure you that in our effort to make sure that law enforcement can gain the intelligence that it needs in order to protect America, we are also mindful of our responsibility to protect the rights and privacy of Americans.

Within the area of criminal justice, we want to make sure that our laws convey the seriousness of the crime of terrorism.

First, we want to eliminate the statute of limitations for prosecution of terrorism crimes. Second, we feel it is imperative to make sure that terrorism is made the same kind of priority that we would be able to fight with the same kind of integrity and equally strong tools that other crimes are subjected to.

For example, we are identifying instances where the law currently makes it easier to prosecute drug trafficking and organized crime or espionage than it is to prosecute terrorism. If terrorism has not had a priority in the criminal justice system previously, it's time for us to understand that it needs to be a priority in the criminal justice system now. Let me give you two examples we have for increasing the penalties and elevating our capacity to deal with terrorism.

A person who harbors a person involved in espionage is subject to stiffer penalties than a person who harbors an individual involved in terrorism. We think this reflects an inadequate response to the kind of threat that terrorism poses to our culture.

Within financial infrastructure, it is important to have an understanding in our laws of the result of offering financial support to a terrorist. Understanding will not only give us the ability to adequately punish those who assist terrorists, but also move toward dismantling the infrastructure of terrorist organizations.

We are proposing making providing material support or resources to a terrorist organization an offense that would enable us to prosecute someone under the money laundering statutes.

Now, we will be working diligently over the next day or maybe two to finalize this comprehensive proposal, and we will call upon the Congress of the United States to enact these important antiterrorism measures this week. We need these tools to fight the terrorism threat which exists in the United States, and we must meet that growing threat.

Now, I call upon Director Mueller for remarks.

MUELLER: Good afternoon.

Before I spend a moment discussing the current investigation, I want to talk briefly about another area of the FBI's responsibilities, and that relates to civil rights.

Since the horrific attacks on September 11, dozens of retaliatory hate crimes have been directed at members of the Arab-American community, including assaults, arson, threatening communications and two possibly--and I say "possibly"--ethnically motivated murders. Many of these criminal acts have been directed at Muslim houses of worship and at Muslim community centers.

I want to make it very clear: Vigilante attacks and threats against Arab-Americans will not be tolerated. We are all saddened by the recent acts of terrorism against our nation. Such acts of retaliation violate federal law and, more particularly, run counter to the very principles of equality and freedom upon which our nation is founded.

The FBI and the Department of Justice are committed to aggressively investigating and prosecuting violations of the federal hate crime laws. We, to date, have initiated 40 hate crimes investigations, involving reported attacks on Arab American citizens and institutions. And we are working with the Department of Justice to review other incidents to see if federal violations have taken place. I might also add that the FBI is reaching out to leaders of the Arab American community in each of our 56 field offices across the country.

One another note before we discuss briefly this investigation. I want to announce that the FBI is again calling upon the support and assistance of the American people. We are actively seeking and recruiting English-speaking individuals with a professional level of proficiency in Arabic and Farsi.

Those who would wish to join must be American citizens who have been permanent residents of the United States for at least three of the last five years. Each of these individuals who would seek to be employed by the FBI will be evaluated based on experience and education, and must pass a thorough background investigation and a language proficiency examination. We ask that anyone who is interested in this and has the proficiency to call 1-866-483-5137, and let me repeat that: 1-866-483-5137. Call that number or check the FBI website at www.fbi.gov.

Now, turning to the ongoing investigation, I'll say that we now have 500 personnel here in FBI headquarters, representative of 32 agencies, federal, state and local, working 24 hours a day coordinating the investigation across the country, and I should say also internationally, because we have more than 30 FBI legat offices across the world

involved in the investigation.

The AG--attorney general--already mentioned that we've had 47,000 Internet tips. Our hotline has produced 7,800 tips. In addition to that, we've had in excess of 26,000 leads generated through the various field offices.

I might finish up by saying that we have, in the course of questioning a number of individuals throughout the country, we have 49 individuals who are currently being detained by the Immigration Service because of some concerns about the status of those individuals in the country.

And with that, I think the attorney general and I would be happy to answer questions.

QUESTION: (OFF-MIKE) is that why you're looking for people who speak Arabic and Farsi?

MUELLER: We have had a language shortage for a period of time. I don't think it would be just the FBI; I think it's a number of federal agencies. And we feel at this point in time we can use the additional manpower helping us with the language issues.

QUESTION: Director, how many people have you arrested on material witness lines or otherwise?

MUELLER: I cannot and will not give you the total numbers on material witness warrants. Suffice it to say that there are a number of material witness warrants that have been issued. They are sealed in most cases, and I cannot give you direct numbers.

QUESTION: Director, why can't you give us those direct numbers?

MUELLER: They're under seal. A number of the warrants are under seal.

QUESTION: Could you at least characterize the level of cooperation at this point from the people that you've detained and also the people who are in INS custody, if you're talking to them and if they've been providing valuable information?

MUELLER: Well, it's hard to generalize. There are individuals cooperating, yes. There are a number of individuals that are not cooperating.

Next question? Yes, sir?

QUESTION: Are any of you aware of reports that there have been names on watch lists in which there have been gaps in time before CIA information is passed along to the FAA or the FBI or the INS? Could

you talk a little bit about how that process works and what is an acceptable amount of time before the word gets to these various security agencies?

MUELLER: Well, I know there is talk of one incident in which individuals have come into the country and subsequent to their arrival in the country, they are put on a watch list. And when we're talking about a watch list, in this circumstance, we're talking about the watch list at the borders, so that somebody seeking to gain entry to the United States goes through immigration, and the name pops up.

There is an incident where a name had been passed on, and the person was already in the country, and the FBI sought to find that individual or individuals. One finds that when they fill out the cards at the border, they can put down "Marriott, New York City." And as everybody knows, there are a number of Marriotts in New York City--or Sheraton, Detroit or Los Angeles.

And when we're passed a name and required to find the individual and we have no identify data other than a hotel or motel, we do the obvious thing and go to either Marriott or Sheraton or the other hotel chain and have them run all the hotels in that vicinity. But it is very difficult quite often to find somebody once they're in the country.

Yes, sir?

QUESTION: Just a follow-up to that. Were warning signs missed that might have played a part in this, not only in San Diego, but also in Minnesota in the weeks before the attacks?

MUELLER: There were no warning signs that I'm aware of that would indicate this type of operation in the country.

Yes?

QUESTION: We're hearing a number of complaints from the Arab American community that the FBI is targeting people, questioning people based solely on their ethnic background. Can you address that?

MUELLER: Absolutely. And thank you for raising that. If that is a perception out there, I would like to dispell it.

Well, it's hard to generalize. There are individuals cooperating, yes. There are a number of individuals that are not cooperating.

Next question? Yes, sir?

QUESTION: Are any of you aware of reports that there have been names on watch lists in which there have been gaps in time before CIA information is passed along to the FAA or the FBI or the INS? Could

QUESTION: Could you elaborate on what specific change there was or technical capabilities will be necessary to tap and monitor disposal (OFF-MIKE)

MUELLER: Talking specifically about the telephones, as we mentioned, a piece of legislation would enable us to obtain wiretap authority for an individual regardless of--whether he buys a cell phone on day one and a week later buys another cell phone with another number and moves from cell phone to cell phone seeking to avoid interception. That's a key piece of legislation that would be very helpful to us in monitoring conversations of those we suspect or know to be terrorists.

Yes, sir?


QUESTION: Thank you. Where are these two murders that you think are racially inspired?

MUELLER: I'm not going to discuss any of the facts about that. As I said--I said "possibly inspired."

Thank you very much.

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