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Tenet Calls for Security Safety Net; CIA, FBI Can't Protect Nation Against All Threats, Director Tells Hill

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CIA Director George J. Tenet said yesterday the government must make "systematic security improvements" to the nation's infrastructure, warning that the CIA and law enforcement can't protect the United States against all threats.

"If there is no strategic security safety net at the back end -- in the homeland -- then we will be left with a situation where we and the FBI will have to be operationally flawless -- in the sports parlance, bat one thousand," Tenet said.

At a hearing before the Senate Governmental Affairs Committee on President Bush's proposed homeland security department, Tenet said the federal government should conduct "a systematic assessment of the country's vulnerability" that is divorced from day-to-day efforts to track down terrorists in the United States.

Only such an assessment, which has been talked about for years but never completed, would give the government the ability to "design smart, agile ways to protect" the country. "An assessment of the country's vulnerabilities and a systematic program of protection, that's what the country doesn't have," Tenet testified.

Tenet's assessment was a candid reminder of the challenges confronting the government, nine months after the Sept. 11 attacks, as it seeks to protect the United States from future strikes. While plans have been devised over the years with the help of private industry to protect nuclear power plants and the telecommunications system, they have not been expanded to include all vital infrastructure.

Appearing with FBI Director Robert S. Mueller III, Tenet said the homeland security department's "most important role will be to translate assessments about evolving terrorist targeting strategies, training and doctrine overseas into a system of protection for the infrastructure of the United States."

The Cabinet-level Department of Homeland Security would merge some agencies -- the Immigration and Naturalization Service, the Coast Guard, the Customs Service and the Transportation Security Administration -- and

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create a separate intelligence division that would receive information from the CIA and the FBI to assess and react to threats.

As proposed, the reorganization leaves the CIA and FBI largely untouched. The FBI's central mission historically has been to gather evidence to prosecute domestic crimes. Since Sept. 11, "our focus is now one of prevention," Mueller said.

Some members of Congress want to consider folding the FBI's counterterrorism system into the new department. Among them is Sen. George V. Voinovich (R-Ohio). "I don't see how the bureau can do all of this and do it well," he told Mueller.

But Mueller and Tenet opposed the idea. "At the very least," Mueller said, "such a move at the present moment would disrupt the current work being done against terrorism."

Also at issue is whether the new department would have the power to order the FBI and the CIA to collect information against certain targets it identified. "I would not give 100 percent assurance," Mueller said. But, he added, the bureau would probably accept such requests as long as they were matters his agents could legally pursue.

Tenet said that "nine times out of 10," such requests for information are followed, but he added that when it comes to directing covert human intelligence, "operational judgment is usually left to us."

Chairman Joseph I. Lieberman (D-Conn.) said that the committee "may give authority" in legislation to the new secretary to make sure the department's requests are honored.

The Senate Judiciary Committee, meanwhile, stepped up its review of allegations that FBI headquarters staff mishandled the case of Zacarias Moussaoui, the alleged "20th hijacker" in the Sept. 11 attacks. Sen. Arlen Specter (R-Pa.) said he wants to determine if the Justice Department and the FBI have been "gun shy" about pursuing warrants to conduct surveillance on terror suspects.

Moussaoui, 33, a French citizen of Moroccan descent, was arrested Aug. 16 for overstaying his visa after arousing suspicions while taking flight training in Eagan, Minn. In a letter last month to Mueller, FBI attorney Coleen Rowley wrote that Minneapolis agents tried to gain a warrant to search Moussaoui's laptop computer and personal belongings but were undermined by headquarters officials, who declined to seek one under the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act.

Rowley, the chief lawyer for the Minneapolis field office, maintains that investigators had enough evidence of Moussaoui's terror connections to secure such a warrant. Moussaoui subsequently was charged as a conspirator in the attacks.

The judiciary panel heard testimony from FBI staff members at a closed hearing. The hearing on the FISA process included Marion "Spike" Bowman, the attorney who heads the FBI's National Security Law Unit, sources said.

Also yesterday, House Judiciary Committee Chairman F. James Sensenbrenner Jr. (R-Wis.) abruptly canceled a scheduled appearance before the committee by Attorney General John D. Ashcroft, saying that Ashcroft had failed to provide a copy of his prepared statement as required.

Sensenbrenner has been strongly critical of Ashcroft's move to loosen restrictions on the FBI's ability to conduct domestic surveillance, the topic of yesterday's canceled hearing, and has locked horns with Ashcroft on other issues.

Staff writers Walter Pincus and Dan Eggen contributed to this report.

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