

Nuclear plants targeted for terror attacks

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U.S. intelligence agencies have issued an internal alert that Islamic terrorists are planning another spectacular attack to rival those carried out on September 11.

The detailed warning was issued within the past two weeks in a classified report that said one target was a U.S. nuclear power plant or one of the Energy Department's nuclear facilities.

The alert was based on sensitive intelligence gathered overseas that revealed discussions among terrorism suspects.

The latest warning was similar to other terrorist threats that prompted public alerts in October and December.

Officials familiar with the report said it contained six potential methods and targets of attack, among them:

- * A bombing or airline attack on a nuclear power plant or other U.S. nuclear facility, such as a weapons storage depot, designed to cause mass casualties and spread deadly radiological debris.
- * A bombing against a U.S. warship in Bahrain, headquarters of the U.S. Navy's 5th Fleet, where some 20 ships are based. The attack would be similar to the October 2000 suicide bombing attack on the USS Cole.
- * Another airliner attack on a building using a hijacked commercial jet as a suicide bomber.
- * A vehicle bombing in Yemen. Authorities in Yemen, acting on intelligence gathered by the United States in Afghanistan, recently averted a car bombing of the U.S. Embassy in San`a by finding the explosives-laden vehicle.

A public alert had been issued Jan. 14 that said al Qaeda terrorists were planning an attack in Yemen.

President Bush said in his State of the Union speech Tuesday night that U.S. intelligence agencies had uncovered plans of U.S. nuclear power plants at terrorist bases in Afghanistan, an indication attacks on the facilities were planned.

"We have found diagrams of American nuclear power plants and public water facilities, detailed instructions for making chemical weapons, surveillance maps of American cities, and thorough descriptions of landmarks in America and throughout the world," Mr. Bush said.

"What we have found in Afghanistan confirms that - far from ending there - our war against terror is only beginning," he said.

A defense official said yesterday that intelligence gained from Afghanistan had led to the thwarting of three terrorist attacks, including the arrests of terrorists in Singapore and Yemen. A third operation is still "being rolled up," the official said.

"We have been getting a lot of indications [of an attack] but no specific threat information," the official said.

Yemen's foreign minister, Abubaker al-Qirbi, told The Washington Post on Wednesday that authorities in Yemen have tracked down two key al Qaeda suspects in that country.

Mr. al-Qirbi said Yemen was working to capture a group of suspects wanted by the United States for questioning about their links to Osama bin Laden, blamed for the September 11 attacks.

A U.S. intelligence official said the intelligence community is constantly receiving new threat data.

"It's a heightened threat environment, and we get threat information on a regular basis," this official said.

No public announcement has been made of an impending terrorist attack based on recent assessments. But the information related to a potential new attack first came to the attention of intelligence agencies last week, officials said.

The last time the Bush administration issued a public warning of a potential terrorist attack was Dec. 3, when Homeland Security Director Tom Ridge announced that Americans should be alert to the danger of an attack. It was the second such warning.

"We remain on alert," Ridge spokesman Gordon Johndroe said yesterday, adding that the FBI also has issued a warning to law enforcement around the country to remain on high alert through March 11.

"Subsequent warnings for heightened vigilance around utilities, nuclear power plants, water treatment plants were issued a couple of weeks ago," Mr. Johndroe said in an interview. "The threat remains, and therefore we remain on alert."

Attorney General John Ashcroft said Friday, in releasing a photograph of a suspected suicide terrorist, that "I want to advise the public to exercise vigilance and common sense in the face of the terrorism threat."

On Jan. 17, Mr. Ashcroft released photographs of five al Qaeda terrorists whose statement made on videotapes found in Afghanistan "suggest future terrorist acts, specifically suicide attacks."

Energy Department spokeswoman Lisa Cutler said security has been stepped up at nuclear-weapons facilities throughout the United States since September 11.

In San Francisco yesterday, security guards detected bomb residue on the shoes of a passenger seeking to pass through a security checkpoint. The man disappeared before he could be questioned.

On Dec. 22, Richard C. Reid, a British national linked to the al Qaeda terrorist network, was arrested after he tried to light the fuse of an explosives-laden shoe on a Paris-to-Miami flight, authorities said.