

Gov Ridge Holds Homeland Security Briefing

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Statement by Homeland Security Director Tom Ridge
The James S. Brady Briefing Room

4:55 P.M. EST

GOVERNOR RIDGE: I've just completed a conference call with the nation's governors to let them know what I'm here to share with the American people. I might add, I also wanted to commend them for their work in improving and strengthening homeland security since September 11th. We've been in frequent communication either with the organizations or with individual governors, and I think their work to date has reflected the kind of relationship between the federal and the state and local government that we need to make a permanent part of our homeland security defense.

Over the last several days our intelligence in law enforcement agencies have seen an increased volume in level of activity involving threats of terrorist attacks. The information we have does not point to any specific target either in America or abroad. And it does not outline any specific type of attack.

However, the analysts who review this information believe the quantity and level of threats are above the norm and have reached a threshold where we should once again place the public on general alert, just as we have done on two previous occasions since September 11th.

During his address on homeland security in Atlanta, President Bush promised the American people that when we have evidence of credible threats we will issue appropriate alerts. That is exactly what we're doing here today.

The President also reminded all of us that a terrorism alert is not a signal to stop your life. It is a call to be vigilant, to know that your government is on high alert and to add your eyes and your ears to our efforts to find and stop those who want to do us harm.

Our government is taking precautions. This afternoon, the FBI is issuing a terrorist threat advisory update to 18,000 law enforcement agencies across the country through the National Law Enforcement Telecommunication System known as NLETS. Law enforcement agencies have been instructed to stay on the highest alert and to immediately notify the FBI of any unusual or suspicious activity.

Again, I emphasize this perhaps to my own peril, but, again, the threats we are picking up are very generic. They warn of more attacks, but are not specific about where or what type. We do know that the next several weeks, which bring the final weeks of Ramadan and important religious observations in other faiths, have been times when terrorists have planned attacks in the past.

One example is December of 1999. Authorities in Jordan, Canada and the United States uncovered and prevented plans for a series of attacks related to the dawn of the new millennium. Those plans were thwarted when intelligence learned about them, and law enforcement arrested the suspected terrorists.

Now, obviously, the further removed we get from September 11th, I think the natural tendency is to let down our guard. Unfortunately, we cannot do that. We are a nation at war. We are the targets of enemies who have demonstrated they have no remorse about killing thousands of innocent civilians. The government will continue to do everything we can to find and stop those who seek to harm us. And I believe we owe it to the American people to remind them that they must be vigilant, as well.

I also know the very first question the American people will ask, so Governor Ridge, besides being vigilant, what else should my family and I do? The answer is you should report any suspicious activity or behavior to local authorities. And perhaps as importantly, you should heed the words of your President, who has called on

all of us to rely on our good judgment and our common sense to continue to live in a spirit of courage and optimism and resolve, to defeat the enemy.

Q What makes these threats credible, besides the volume? And are they coming from any specific terrorist group or cell, for example, al Qaeda?

GOVERNOR RIDGE: Every single day the intelligence community gathers information and makes judgments -- renders judgments about their credibility and their relevance. And the accumulation of information we've received over the past couple of days has risen to the level where we thought it was appropriate to again put out a general alert.

It comes from multiple sources, and obviously there are men and women within the community whose business it has been for years to take a look at that information and draw conclusions and determine what we should do about it. But it is just the volume, as well as, obviously, the credibility associated with some of the information we've received that led us to have this discussion around which there was no disagreement -- that it was at the volume and at the level we should remind America we're still at war, we're still at risk, be vigilant, be aware.

Q Is there any connection between this new warning and the Israeli attacks and the Israeli response to the Palestinian suicide bombings?

GOVERNOR RIDGE: There is nothing in the information that we received that would draw a specific connection. But it is important, I think, to note that from time to time, and even in a very vigilant society that's had to deal with acts of political terrorism, not for months, but for decades, that the unthinkable can happen and innocent people can be killed.

Q Governor Ridge, do you feel that there has been, as you said, law enforcement agencies letting down their guard, and the public letting down their guard, since Ashcroft announced that there was a heightened state of alert a couple weeks ago? Do you feel that the American public has kind of moved in a sense of comfort since that heightened state of alert and nothing has happened?

GOVERNOR RIDGE: Well, I think that America generally has remained at a state of readiness and alert and, fortunately, has basically accepted the President's encouragement to go live your lives -- at least the retail sales on the day after Thanksgiving suggested that a lot of people were back into a routine normally associated with this time of the year.

But I think it is very predictable and very understandable and very human, the further you get, the further away you are from an event, that distance and time may even unconsciously erode your commitment, erode that wariness, that attention span. And so, again, to remind everyone we're still at war, we're still at risk. The one war/two battlefields, you know, you've seen pictures of those Marines and those soldiers digging in, they don't have to be reminded because they've got a conventional battlefield. Ours is still an unconventional battlefield and I think it's very appropriate that we remind all Americans to be at alert.

Q Governor Ridge, to follow up, the last time you were here in the briefing room you told us that we were on a state of alert indefinitely. Did you ever specifically ask local or federal officials to back off of that state of alert? Or have they backed off in any way?

GOVERNOR RIDGE: I would suspect, depending on the state and depending on the decisions that some of the governors may have made in terms of the resources and the people they've committed to defending what they consider to be points of vulnerability in their states, they may have made some adjustments. And, basically, in my conversation with my colleagues a few minutes ago, I said now is not the time to back off. I believe you're out there, I believe you're vigilant, but over the next several weeks, based on this information, it's my recommendation you remain at the state of readiness.

And the other recommendation, frankly, was to remind their citizens, no matter where you live, it can be a big state with a dense population, or you can be a smaller state with a lot of rural communities. We have no way of assuring or guaranteeing or pinpointing where the terrorists will attack.

Q Can I ask you about the anthrax? Are you guys now satisfied that Otilie Lundgren's case came from cross-contamination? And is that, frankly, more of a reason for people to worry about the mail than less?

GOVERNOR RIDGE: Based upon the identification of the letter that followed the Daschle letter, and its

delivery to the home in her neighborhood, it certainly offers a plausible explanation for what transpired. But it's also, at least to date, in conflict with the fact that they'd taken swabs in her house where the mail may have been deposited, and other places, and there are no traces in her home. So I think it adds some credibility to an explanation, but it does not confirm that explanation.

Q Governor, can you help us and the American people understand the scope of this new information? Does this increased level picked up by intelligence services emanate from one part of the world, or is it communications with terrorist cells around the world? And do any of the communications -- is the source of those communications here in the United States?

GOVERNOR RIDGE: The information we receive is literally from, as you report and as you know, from all around the world. The sources, in terms of their geography, are no different than anything that we received in the past. But -- I mean the origin. But the sources are more credible, and we might just say the decibel level is higher, as they talk about potential attacks.

Again, the origin is pretty much the same in terms of the location of where the information may have been gathered. But the -- those people involved in the communication we deemed as more credible. And it's also the volume over the past couple of days.

Q If I could follow up on that, if I may. As you evaluate when to come before the American people and issue the kind of alert you're issuing here, is it a function more of quantity of intelligence, or quality? Can you give a -- if you have any kind of a framework that you can share with us, we'd certainly love to know about that.

GOVERNOR RIDGE: Well, it's a very appropriate question. Suffice it to say that judgments are placed upon the different kinds of communication, the different kinds of information received on a day-to-day basis. And, obviously, within the intelligence community we've got a lot of very talented people with a great deal of experience and are very intuitive. A lot of them are very intuitive about the kind of information they've received, and their ability to connect the dots is based upon experience, as well.

And sometimes there's legitimate disagreement within the community as to whether or not they're specific enough or credible enough, or rise to a level where you've got to bring this matter before the American public. And, unfortunately -- giving you a general answer to a specific question, it's more of an art than a science -- but the conclusion of everyone who has looked at this information over the past couple days was, again, a time to remind America we're at war, we're fighting them in Afghanistan, we've got to fight them in America, and one of the best ways to combat your enemy is to be alert and be mindful -- be situationally aware.

Q Is this information specifically connected, did you say, to the observations of Ramadan or other holidays? And did you consider the impact on holiday retail sales of making this warning, and how did that discussion go?

GOVERNOR RIDGE: Certainly, the convergence of different religious observations over the next couple of weeks is -- and the impact that that has on the celebration of faith and holidays is something that we certainly took into consideration.

But you know, terrorists, even if there was a specific timetable or a specific holiday toward which they were pointing -- I mean, I think we know, based on previous experience, that if we were able to disrupt that activity, and if they had to postpone it, they would wait until they were prepared and could strike.

So, yes, it was considered. We don't believe there should be, nor there will be, any change in anybody's plans to participate in their religious holidays and to enjoy the seasons and their families. But, again, the convergence of information suggests, ladies and gentlemen of America: We're at war. Be on alert.

Q Governor Ridge, how should the public understand the process, this alert process? You come out and give us alerts from time to time, and tell people what you're told them today. But alerts never seem to get lifted; we just get new ones to replace the old ones. And I'm just wondering if you worry about people becoming jaded as a result of this process.

Q What's the President's role in --

GOVERNOR RIDGE: The President -- this matter was presented to the President this morning, and he approved our decision to go forward and make the announcement. Discerning specific, credible information and concluding that it gives rise to a reminder to America that we're still at war, is a -- as I said before, is an

art, it's not a science. And it would be so much easier, admittedly, if there were more specifics we could refer to. But there are not.

These are shadow soldiers. This is a shadow enemy. As a soldier, from time to time, in my personal experience and a lot of other soldiers have experienced in a more conventional wartime situation, offer -- often, you are given information about the location of the enemy, the size of the enemy, perhaps how the enemy is equipped. This is a little bit different time.

But, again, as we make those calculations and draw those conclusions, there's not always broad-based agreement that this is a credible threat. We viewed these as credible, and that's why we're just asking America to be on alert, be ready.

Q Is this more serious than the other two threats, though? Is this alert -- threat alert more serious than the previous two?

GOVERNOR RIDGE: You know, conceivably, if you take a look, this has been the third alert, clearly. But every day, we accumulate information. Every day, the analysts take a look at the sources. Every day, they try to put the dots together. But it's not every day that either Attorney General Ashcroft or I have come out to the podium. And it has been the aggregation of this information and the unanimous conclusion by the experts over the past couple of days as they've looked at it, it's now time to come back out and tell -- remind America we're still at war and be on alert.

Thank you very much.

END 5:11 P.M. EST

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