

Director Ridge, Attorney General Ashcroft Discuss Threat Level

Release Date: 09/10/02 00:00:00

For Immediate Release
Office of the Press Secretary
September 10, 2002

Remarks by the Attorney General and Governor Ridge

The Justice Department

1:35 P.M. EDT

ATTORNEY GENERAL ASHCROFT: (In progress) I want to express my appreciation to Governor Tom Ridge, who is the Advisor to the President for Homeland Security, for being here; and to the Director of the FBI, Bob Mueller, for being here.

The United States government has concluded, based on analysis and specific intelligence of possible attacks on U.S. interests overseas, to call government, law enforcement, and citizens, both at home and overseas, to a heightened state of alert.

After conferring with the Homeland Security Council, the recommendation has been made to increase the national threat level, currently classified at Elevated Risk, to High Risk. The President has accepted this recommendation.

The U.S. intelligence community has received information, based on debriefings of a senior al Qaeda operative, of possible terrorists attacks timed to coincide with the anniversary of the September 11th attacks on the United States. Information indicates that al Qaeda cells have been established in several South Asian countries in order to conduct car-bomb and other attacks on U.S. facilities. These cells have been accumulating explosives since approximately January of 2002, this year, in preparation for these attacks.

The U.S. intelligence community has also received information that one or more individuals in the Middle East are preparing for a suicide attack, or attacks, against U.S. interests. At this time, we have no specific information as to where these attacks might occur.

The U.S. intelligence community has concluded that the most likely attacks of al Qaeda attacks -- the most likely targets of al Qaeda attacks are the transportation and energy sectors, and facilities or gatherings that would be recognized worldwide as symbols of American power or security. Examples of such symbols are U.S. military facilities, U.S. embassies, and national monuments.

In addition, U.S. intelligence has concluded that lower-level al Qaeda operatives may view the September 11th anniversary as a suitable time to lash out in even small strikes, to demonstrate their worldwide presence and resolve. Accordingly, widely dispersed, unsophisticated strikes are possible, as well.

The specificity of some of the information and analysis has contributed to the decision to close four U.S. embassies in Southeast Asia, and to elevate our security at all overseas diplomatic and military facilities. The increased threat level is based on specific intelligence received and analyzed by the full intelligence community. This information has been corroborated by multiple intelligence sources.

Last year at this time, United States intelligence discerned similar patterns of terrorist threat reporting overseas. In addition, other recent events parallel terrorist activity that occurred in the weeks prior to last year's attacks.

I want to emphasize that the recommendation made today was not made to move to the highest level of alert, an action that would have been triggered by specific credible intelligence and analysis pointing toward an imminent attack on the United States homeland. At this time, most intelligence focuses on possible attacks on U.S. interests overseas.

As Attorney General, I have directed the Joint Terrorism Task Forces nationwide -- there are joint terrorism task forces all across America in the various FBI district offices -- I have directed that they coordinate their local response with U.S. attorneys and local antiterrorism task forces. In addition, I have directed that all relevant information be shared with the Joint Terrorism Task Forces in order for federal officials to work effectively and cooperatively with state and local officials.

As we have been forced to do in the past, today we once again call on the American people to remain alert, but defiant in the face of this new threat. We are not -- we are not recommending that events be cancelled, nor do we recommend that individuals change domestic travel plans or that the federal work force not report to duty. We are not making those recommendations. We ask that Americans, both at home and abroad, mark the anniversary of last year's savage attacks with a heightened awareness of their environment and the activities occurring around them.

This call, which Americans have heard before, is based on specific intelligence that heightened awareness and readiness deters terrorism. Each of us has the ability to increase the security that we need -- security for ourselves, security for our families, and security for our communities. Today we call on Americans to exercise this responsibility with special care and vigilance.

Now Governor Ridge will discuss actions which will, and can be taken in response to this new information.

Governor Tom Ridge.

GOVERNOR RIDGE: Thank you, General.

Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen. As the Attorney General has announced, we are now at high risk of a terrorist attack. We now are at Level Orange. This heightened threat level has been, or is being communicated to local and state law enforcement, federal agencies, members of Congress, governors, state homeland security advisors, and representatives of the private sector.

The nation's Homeland Security Advisory System provides a national framework to inform and facilitate decisions appropriate to different levels of government and to private citizens, either in the workplace or at home. The system couples the threat level with protective measures that will be taken to reduce our country's vulnerabilities. Specific protective measures will be taken by all federal agencies as a result of the decision to raise the threat level, to reduce vulnerabilities. All federal agencies have provided to the Office of Homeland Security the protective measures that they have been prepared to adapt to the threat advisory system by the end of August.

And included among some of those that these agencies will consider taking in response to the elevation of the threat will be additional security personnel at federal facilities. At the very least, we want to ensure that security is more visible, as a part of deterring terrorist activity. Given -- depending on the department and the area they are attempting to secure, they may engage in increased surveillance or counter-surveillance operations. They may make adjustments as to the number of entry points into buildings, and if there are strict security procedures associated with access, we're going to encourage everyone to make sure that they enforce them to the very letter of the law, no exceptions.

There may be some barriers erected to alter some of the traffic flow. There may be more frequent inspections of people or cars entering federal facilities. These are just some of the examples of the extra steps that ought or will be taken by all federal agencies. And I might add that in talking with several governors and homeland security advisors prior -- just within the past half-hour, some states and organizations, in response to the threat advisory system, had already prepared different protective measures that they would embark upon if we were to raise the level of threat. And we are assimilating that information and getting it out to the governors and homeland security advisors and local law enforcement.

At the same time we are taking these actions at the federal level, governors, mayors, state and local enforcement, as well as private sector managers of the nation's critical infrastructure, will be taking action, as well. For individual Americans, every citizen, we know this is a very sobering announcement. Just as federal, state, and local officials are taking precautions, we certainly recommend and think there are some common-sense measures that would enhance their security, and just some common-sense precautionary things they should do, as well.

I know we've called on them before, but the Attorney General, the FBI Director, and I see on a fairly regular basis what happens with citizen involvement when they are extra vigilant, extra careful, when they become

very alert to suspicious activity. We're going to call on them to maintain that high level of awareness. As the Attorney General said, be alert, but be defiant. Let's make sure that every individual citizen who sees something suspicious reports it, to either the Joint Terrorism Task Force or the local law enforcement.

Parents may want to have a communication plan and talk to their children and their family about the significance of September 11th, and about the possibility that those who would do us harm may choose that date, or any time around the commemorative period to do us harm again. We'd encourage employers and employees to know their own emergency plans, to review them -- to talk to the governors and the homeland security advisors, to put some of their facilities on alert, on call. Again, there are a lot of very practical common-sense measures that we will be encouraging, and basically giving some direction the states and locals could take.

Now, beyond these very, very important steps, our advice to America as we engage the local law enforcement, the state law enforcement, the private sector, as we engage everyone who has critical responsibilities to reduce vulnerabilities and protect our homeland, our advice to America is to continue with your plans. If your travel is in your plans, attendance at a public event is in your plans, we would like you to proceed, to do as you had planned to do, but be wary and be mindful that because of the specific information that we have, very consistent with the pattern of intelligence activity that was detected prior to 9/11, that the recommendation was made to raise the level of alert.

I might add that I don't think America needs to be reminded that we are at war. However, this announcement is a reminder that there are people around the world who would do us harm. And our response is to continue to be America, but to be alert, to be vigilant. We have persevered through this, we'll persevere now, and ultimately we will prevail.

Thank you.

Q General, is there any intelligence to suggest that these -- any attacks are planned domestically, or is the concern primarily overseas?

ATTORNEY GENERAL ASHCROFT: I would say that the most recent intelligence which has prompted us to issue this change in our status has focused primarily overseas. And, frankly, part of our interpretation, or part of the analysis of that is that that's very similar to the circumstances that existed a year ago.

Q It seems like, with the timing of this announcement, was there new information that you came into knowledge of, or is this based on just an analysis -- continuing analysis of information that's been out there for some time?

ATTORNEY GENERAL ASHCROFT: Well, in a way the answer is, yes, new information has fed into an analytic structure or is this based on just an analysis, continuing analysis of information that's been out there?

ATTORNEY GENERAL ASHCROFT: In a way, the answer is yes. New information has fed into an analytic structure which has made us take very seriously both the new information and the analysis, which leads us to this conclusion. So information has become available very recently, which, together with the analysis of the general circumstances and the situation, leads us to make this change.

Q General, how likely do you think that there -- given the significance of this day -- that there will be a terrorist attempt, whether successful or not? Do you expect that something will happen tomorrow?

ATTORNEY GENERAL ASHCROFT: Well, we really hope that by being alert and by having elevated security, that we default the attempt of any terrorist activities. The primary aspiration that we have is to prevent terrorist attacks. And we believe that state and local law enforcement, federal authorities, citizens of this nation working together are the best effort we can make for prevention. So there is an anomaly here -- that if we are most successful with this announcement, we will prevent the attacks which might otherwise exist. And we think that would be a wonderful outcome.

Q Some of the information from senior al Qaeda operatives which you've operated on in the past and put out alerts have proven to be -- nothing's happened. And so the question has arisen whether or not these al Qaeda operatives have the opportunity to sort of scare us or jerk our chain. And obviously, you have to consider that in any case. Is there something different this time?

ATTORNEY GENERAL ASHCROFT: Well, we believe this to be credible information. And the analysis that

has been undertaken by the intelligence agencies leads us to conclude that the steps we are taking are appropriate steps in the national interest.

Q General Ashcroft, you said this was from a senior al Qaeda operative. Can you discuss who that person is, and give us any indication of where they're being held and what kind of information they've provided?

ATTORNEY GENERAL ASHCROFT: No. Thank you.

Q General Ashcroft, you said you don't want to cancel events, or -- people should go about their daily lives. Did you at all consider looking at cancelling events? And what made you decide not to do that? And how close did you come to the decision on maybe cancelling some events?

ATTORNEY GENERAL ASHCROFT: Well, we believe that there is an elevated risk, and we think the best way to help guard against that risk becoming a reality is to share with the American people, and particularly the law enforcement community of the United States and those who have responsibility for defending our infrastructure, the information that's appropriate in that risk, to prevent these activities.

I don't believe that the analysis or the information leads us -- has led us at any time to consider the cancellation of events. If we believed that was appropriate, we would not hesitate to do so.

Q General, how long do you expect this new elevated status to continue?

ATTORNEY GENERAL ASHCROFT: You know, if we had the ability to define the times at which risks existed we would just define the time as zero and not have them. That's just another way of saying the assessment of the risk will define the duration of how much time we assign this level of risk, in terms of public awareness.

And we'll constantly be reassessing and pursuing the leads that come from the kind of information we've received, with a view toward the evaluation of where we are and whether -- at what level the risks exist. Obviously, we'd love to see events transpire in such a way as to demonstrate a substantially reduced risk, but we're not at that point yet.

Q You mentioned energy and transportation as two vulnerable sectors. Can you be more specific, and why do you -- why those two sectors?

ATTORNEY GENERAL ASHCROFT: Well, we no historically that transportation has been a dramatic way in which the terrorist community has sought to impose its will, as opposed to the values expressed in the cultures of freedom. Whether you're talking about the transportation -- public transportation of buses and car bombs in the Middle East, or you're talking about the utilization of aircraft in the United States, they're symbolic, they're high profile or those kinds of things. And those things that relate to the success and survival of our culture are things that are obvious targets.

I think if you care to supplement my answer there, I'd be happy to have you do so. But that's what I could say in response to that question.

GOVERNOR RIDGE: I think, first of all, there had been a heightened sense of awareness that I think that was occurring within the private sector, as well at the state and local level, just because of the significance that this country places on the public events tomorrow. And there had been several discussions about the importance of the ceremonies tomorrow, as we remember, but also the possibility -- although not based on any credible information. Human instincts as they are, I think most Americans concluded even in their own mind that if you were thinking like a terrorist, then perhaps coming back again over the same date might be something you'd want to do.

Now, we don't believe that they do anything other than operate when they're ready. No particular symbolism -- no particular urgency attached to a symbolic date. But when you attach the symbolic date with the specific information that has been corroborated, coupled with a similar pattern of activity almost a year ago, you put those three things together, and you say, for the time being we've asked to raise the level of emergency in this country.

We have continued to make improvements in the transportation community, particularly with an eye toward aviation and for -- there will be certain things that will be done we can't share with you publicly with regard to aviation, but every air marshal available will be available and flying over the next several days. It's just one of the responses that we're going to undertake as we elevate the threat level.

Q General Ashcroft, you mentioned car bombs. Is that pretty much the worst-case scenario, or is there concern, particularly on this day, of terrorist action that might have far greater destruction?

ATTORNEY GENERAL ASHCROFT: Well, I think we are very concerned about a full range of terrorist activities. One of the characteristics of the pre-9/11 period from a year ago was that there was a lot of traffic, if you will, that related to conventional terrorist activities, and yet, very shortly thereafter, or in the virtual same time frame, dramatically new unheard-of activities were engaged in. So we believe that we know from our intelligence activities that have been well reported that the terrorist community has been very active in a wide variety of terrorism potentials. And while car bombs are a very significant part, car bombs, truck bombs, explosive devices, we also know that the terrorist community has been interested, and al Qaeda in specific, and their associates have been interested in a wide range of terrorist devices.

Q (inaudible.)

ATTORNEY GENERAL ASHCROFT: Well, I think they are well understood. I don't mean to -- if I made any specification today, it would not be for purposes of associating them with the elevated alert today. But we have seen that the terrorist community has done research in biological -- evil biology, evil chemistry, in the dispersion of radiological contaminants and the like, and those have been the subject of previous endeavors. And, frankly, when we elevate this alert, we want to remain cognizant of the fact that we're dealing with a complex capacity, with an organization of international reach, and while we have improved our capacity to defend immeasurably, and while we have impaired their capacity in some measure, we also realize that they still have the capacity to operate.

Q If your concern is mainly U.S. targets overseas, by waiting until the day before the anniversary are you not cutting it kind of close in terms of the preparation that Americans overseas or U.S. corporations or others overseas could be doing for the planning?

ATTORNEY GENERAL ASHCROFT: Well, I think I want you all to be cognizant of what prompted this change, and I hope that we've made it clear that this change is based on an analysis of intelligence that -- some of which very recently became available -- which prompted us to work rapidly to make this change. And we have seen rather prompt response to this by our own State Department in its activities regarding its embassies in various settings around the world. And we'll do everything we can to give the American people, both at home and abroad, a level of notice which will allow them to maximize their capacity to make the adjustments that are appropriate and necessary.

Q When you say "recent," do you mean hours, do you mean days?

ATTORNEY GENERAL ASHCROFT: Yes. Thank you very much.

Q What? Which one?

ATTORNEY GENERAL ASHCROFT: In the last 24 hours we have had additional information that's been very, very valuable to us, and significant.

Thank you.

END :00 P.M. EDT

This page was last modified on 09/10/02 00:00:00