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Some Got Warning: Don't Go Downtown on Sept. 11 Feds say Mid-Easterners knew of the coming danger

By GREG B. SMITH
Daily News Staff Writer

Federal investigators have received evidence that some Middle Easterners in the New York area were warned ahead of time to stay out of lower Manhattan the morning of Sept. 11, the Daily News has learned.

The FBI was able to confirm several such warnings occurred but has been unable to discover the source of the warnings.

Agents with the FBI's Joint Terrorist Task Force have interviewed school officials in Jersey City and Brooklyn and questioned members of a Bronx mosque about the warnings, sources told The News.

James Margolin, a spokesman for the FBI's New York office, confirmed that agents were looking into several reports of warnings that preceded the attack against the World Trade Center.

"Among the e-mails and tips we received are a number of reports of people overhearing people boasting about or warning about coming attacks," he said.

Suspicious Comments

He declined to discuss specifics and would not say whether any of the 600-plus people detained in the terror probe were questioned about pre-attack warnings.

But officials and sources familiar with the investigation said the incidents include the following:

Jersey City school administrators confirmed that several days before the attack, a student of Middle Eastern descent issued a vague warning not to travel into lower Manhattan the morning of Sept. 11.

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Joanne Kenny, associate superintendent of the Jersey City public schools, said, "Crisis staff determined that comments made or notes written were serious enough so we called the juvenile bureau of the Jersey City police and they followed up."

Sources Not Found

Jersey City police did not return calls seeking comment, but a source said the matter wound up being investigated by the FBI's Joint Terrorist Task Force.

Kenny wouldn't discuss the nature of the warning or reveal the name of the student who made the comment. But a source said federal authorities investigated the matter and could not determine the source of the warning.

"They ran into a dead end, and whoever may have given the warning denied it," the source said.

In the Bronx, federal investigators received reports about a similar warning at a mosque, sources said. The sources would not reveal the name of the mosque.

Sources with the Joint Terrorist Task Force questioned dozens of members of the mosque, many of whom told agents they had been given a vague warning to stay out of lower Manhattan on Sept. 11, sources said.

One source said investigators again hit a dead end when the mosque's hierarchy denied having prior knowledge of the attack.

The source pointed out that in years past, law enforcement had received tips about warnings to stay away from specific locales and of planned attacks that never materialized.

"There's a cry-wolf aspect to this that you need to put this in context," the source said.

At Brooklyn's New Utrecht High School, the FBI was notified that a Pakistani student in a bilingual class "made a comment to a teacher the week prior about the twin towers," said Karen Finney, spokeswoman for the Board of Education.

Finney would not reveal the nature of the comment, but the Journal-News of Westchester reported yesterday that the student pointed at the tower during a heated political argument and declared, "Look at those two buildings. They won't be here next week."

School officials would not release the name of the student, but said he was still attending classes at New Utrecht. They said they notified New York police and that the matter was turned over to the FBI.

"I don't know what the status of the FBI's investigation is," Finney said.