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Alert on hijackers not 'urgent'

By Bill Gertz
THE WASHINGTON TIMES

Two terrorists who were on the hijacked airliner that hit the Pentagon might have been located before September 11 but the FBI and CIA did not alert immigration officials of the danger they posed, a congressional investigator said yesterday.

If the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) was told in August 2001 that finding al Qaeda terrorists Khalid Almidhar and Nawaf Alhazmi was urgent, the agency could have located them before the September 11 attacks, Eleanor Hill, the staff director of a joint congressional inquiry into intelligence failures, said in a prepared statement.

An FBI memorandum warning that Islamic radicals were taking flight training was sent from Phoenix to FBI headquarters in Washington but was not shared with the Federal Aviation Administration until after the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, Mrs. Hill said.

Mrs. Hill's testimony came in the latest congressional hearing on intelligence failures related to the September 11 attacks.

"Our work to date indicates that the flow of information between all agencies did not necessarily keep pace with the increasing nature of the threat," Mrs. Hill said.

Testimony from the joint congressional inquiry staff highlighted the bureaucratic and institutional obstacles that prevented agencies from sharing intelligence on terrorists in the months and years before the al Qaeda attacks.

Mrs. Hill said the committee's investigation found that "intelligence and non-intelligence personnel alike complained that a range of political, cultural, jurisdictional, legal and bureaucratic issues are ever-present hurdles to information sharing."

"We were told that not all threat information in possession of the intelligence community or law enforcement agencies is necessarily shared with agencies that need it the most in order to counter the threat," she said. "For example, the FAA was not provided a copy of the FBI's Phoenix memorandum prior to September 11, 2001, and still did not have a copy two weeks after the matter had become public in early 2002."

The failure to inform the FAA that terrorists appeared to

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be training as pilots meant the FAA never warned airlines that terrorists might hijack commercial jets and use them as missiles in suicide attacks.

In earlier testimony, Mrs. Hill said a dozen intelligence reports obtained since 1994 indicated that terrorists might use aircraft as weapons, but the information never was shared.

FBI Agent Kenneth Williams on July 10, 2001, sent the memorandum from Phoenix warning that Islamic radicals at a flight school in Arizona were linked to Osama bin Laden and might be planning an attack.

The memo called for an investigation at other flight schools in the United States, but FBI headquarters took no action.

The CIA also did not share "large numbers" of intelligence reports that had the names of terrorist suspects until after September 11; therefore, the names could not be placed on watch lists intended to keep them from entering the United States.

Mrs. Hill said key reasons that intelligence and security agencies do not share information is that security clearances are difficult to obtain and that distribution of classified documents and materials is restricted.

Baltimore Police Commissioner Edward Norris told the hearing that local police are not given information they need to go after terrorists.

"Who do we think needs to know more than the chiefs who protect the cities' citizens?" he said. "We need to know more than anybody in this country what's going on in our cities, yet we don't."

Mrs. Hill said that security agencies such as the FAA and INS had obtained information about the 19 September 11 hijackers but without intelligence could not relate it to any plot to attack the World Trade Center and Pentagon. Those attacks and an aborted hijacking in Pennsylvania caused the deaths of more than 3,000 people.

The two al Qaeda hijackers, Alhazmi and Almidhar, were identified by the CIA as early as January 2000 when they attended a meeting of terrorists.

But the notice to the INS to search for the two men beginning in August 2001 did not include information that "all means" should be used to find them, Mrs. Hill said.

"INS officials said that, had they been told to put the highest priority on that search, they would have used the [Law Enforcement Support Center] and might have found the two suspects prior to September 11," she said.

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