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Testimony

Before the Subcommittee on National Security, Veterans
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COMBATING TERRORISM

Comments on
Counterterrorism
Leadership and National
Strategy

Statement for the Record
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Defense Capabilities and Management



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Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee:

We are pleased to submit this statement for the record to comment on the need for overall leadership and a national strategy to combat terrorism. We have conducted extensive evaluations of programs to combat terrorism—many of them for this subcommittee—going back almost five years. We list our related reports and testimonies at the back of this statement. In fiscal year 2001, the federal government will spend approximately \$11 billion to combat terrorism. In the event of a domestic terrorist incident, states and the affected local governments have the primary responsibility for managing the consequences of a terrorist attack. However, the federal government can assist state and local authorities if they lack the capability to respond adequately.

SUMMARY

Based on our prior and ongoing work, two key issues emerge that the new President and Congress will face concerning programs to combat terrorism. First, the overall leadership and management of such programs are fragmented within the federal government. No single entity acts as the federal government's top official accountable to both the President and Congress. Fragmentation exists in both coordination of domestic preparedness programs and in efforts to develop a national strategy. The Department of Justice worked with other agencies to develop the Attorney General's Five-Year Interagency Counterterrorism and Technology Crime Plan. While this plan is the current document that most resembles a national strategy, we believe it still lacks some critical elements to include measurable desired outcomes, linkage to resources, and a discussion of the role of state and local governments.

ADDRESSING OVERALL LEADERSHIP AND MANAGEMENT

Overall leadership and management efforts are fragmented because there is no single leader in charge of the many functions conducted by different federal departments and agencies. The President appointed a National Coordinator for Security, Infrastructure Protection and Counterterrorism within the National Security Council in May 1998 who was tasked to oversee a broad portfolio of policies and programs related to counterterrorism. However, this position had no budget authority over areas in which essential decisions were being made on federal efforts in combating terrorism. Furthermore, despite the creation of the National Coordinator, no single entity acts as the federal government's top official accountable to both the President and Congress.

Coordinating domestic preparedness programs is another example of fragmented leadership and management with the federal government. Our past work has concluded that the multiplicity of federal assistance programs requires focus and attention to minimize redundancy of efforts and eliminate confusion at the state and local level. Both the Federal Emergency Management Agency and Department of Justice provide liaison and assistance to state and local governments.

The Federal Emergency Management Agency provides grant assistance to the states to support state and local terrorism consequence management planning, training, and exercises. In addition, states work with two offices in the Department of Justice—the National Domestic Preparedness Office and the Office of State and Local Domestic Preparedness. Justice’s National Domestic Preparedness Office was authorized by Congress in 1999 and established for the purpose of coordinating federal terrorism crisis and consequence preparedness programs for the state and local emergency response community.¹ The Office of State and Local Domestic Preparedness currently assists states in the development of their State Domestic Preparedness Strategic Plans. This effort includes funding, training, equipment acquisition, technical assistance, and exercise planning and execution. The overlap of federal efforts and lack of a single federal focal point for state and local assistance have highlighted the need for improved leadership and management.

Efforts to develop a national strategy provide additional evidence that there is fragmented leadership and management. In addition to the existing Attorney General’s 5-year plan, the National Security Council and the Department of Justice’s National Domestic Preparedness Office are each planning to develop national strategies. The danger in this proliferation of strategies is that state and local governments—which are already confused about the multitude of federal domestic preparedness agencies and programs—may become further frustrated about the direction, execution, and management of the overall effort.

Several recent congressional proposals, commission recommendations, and associations’ remarks share our concerns about the fragmentation of leadership and management. Their observations suggest the usefulness of a single entity within the federal government to administer programs to combat domestic terrorism.

DEVELOPING A NATIONAL STRATEGY

Combating terrorism requires our nation to focus on a comprehensive national strategy. A national strategy should articulate a clear vision statement that defines what the nation hopes to achieve through its combating terrorism programs. Key aspects of the national strategy should include (1) roles and missions of federal, state, and local entities and (2) establish objectives, priorities, outcome-related goals with milestones, and performance measures to achieve those goals.² Ultimately, a national strategy should serve as an effective mechanism for ensuring that all elements of the national effort are clearly integrated and properly focused to eliminate gaps and duplication in programs to combat terrorism. Furthermore, this will provide a framework to guide top-level decisions affecting programs, priorities, and funding considerations.

¹ P.L. 106-113, Nov. 29, 1999.

² In our view, the national strategy should incorporate chief tenets of the Government Performance and Results Act of 1993 (P.L. 103-62). The Results Act holds federal agencies accountable for achieving program results and requires federal agencies to clarify their missions, set program goals, and measure performance toward achieving those goals.

In December 1998, the Department of Justice issued the Attorney General's Five-Year Plan as mandated by Congress.³ Congress intended the plan to serve as a baseline for the coordination of a national strategy and operational capabilities to combat terrorism. This classified plan, which represents a substantial interagency effort, includes goals, objectives, performance indicators and recommends specific agency actions to resolve interagency problems. In March 2000, the Department of Justice released an update on the plan, which reported on the accomplishments made by various agencies during fiscal year 1999 on their assigned tasks. The Department of Justice contends that this plan, taken in combination with related presidential decision directives, represents a comprehensive national strategy. We agree that the Attorney General's Five-Year Plan is the current document that most resembles a national strategy. However, we believe that additional work is needed to build upon the progress the plan represents and develop a comprehensive national strategy. Specifically, additional progress should be made in the following areas.

- Based upon our review, the Five-Year Plan does not have measurable desired outcomes. We have reported that a national strategy should provide goals that are related to clearly defined outcomes. For example, the national strategy should include a goal to improve state and local response capabilities. Desired outcomes should be linked to a level of preparedness that response teams should achieve. Without this specificity in a national strategy, the nation will continue to miss opportunities to focus and shape combating terrorism programs to meet the threat.
- Also based upon our review, the Five-Year Plan also lacks linkage to budget resources. We have reported that the nation lacks a coherent framework to develop and evaluate budget requirements for combating terrorism programs since no national strategy exists with clearly defined outcomes. The establishment of a single focal point within the federal government for combating terrorism can provide a mechanism to direct and oversee combating terrorism funding. Moreover, this focal point could ensure that adequate funding is applied to key priorities while eliminating unnecessary spending in duplication efforts to combat terrorism.
- Other experts, such as the Gilmore Commission testifying today, suggest that a national strategy should be developed in close coordination with state and local governments since they play a major role in preparing against and responding to acts of terrorism. Based upon our preliminary analysis, we agree with this position. Local responders will be the first response to mitigate terrorist incidents. Therefore, they should participate in the development of a national strategy and their roles and responsibilities should be clearly defined.

³ The Plan was mandated in the Conference Committee Report of the 1998 Appropriations Act for the Departments of Commerce, Justice, and State; the Judiciary, and Related Agencies.

As with the need for a single focal point, recent congressional proposals, commission recommendations, and associations' remarks share our views on the continued need for a national strategy.

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Today, various experts will testify on the need for a single national entity to lead and manage programs to combat terrorism and to develop a national strategy. Based on our research and analysis and the efforts of these experts, there appears to be a growing consensus that the federal government needs to address both of these issues now.

GAO CONTACTS AND STAFF ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

For future contacts about this statement for the record, please contact Raymond J. Decker, Director, Defense Capabilities and Management at (202) 512-6020. Individuals making key contributions to this statement include Stephen L. Caldwell, Deborah Colantonio, and Krislin Nalwalk.

RELATED GAO PRODUCTS

Combating Terrorism: Federal Response Teams Provide Varied Capabilities; Opportunities Remain to Improve Coordination (GAO-01-14, Nov. 30, 2000).

Combating Terrorism: Linking Threats to Strategies and Resources (GAO/T-NSIAD-00-218, July 26, 2000).

Combating Terrorism: Comments on Bill H.R. 4210 to Manage Selected Counterterrorist Programs (GAO/T-NSIAD-00-172, May 4, 2000).

Combating Terrorism: How Five Foreign Countries Are Organized to Combat Terrorism (GAO/NSIAD-00-85, Apr. 7, 2000).

Combating Terrorism: Issues in Managing Counterterrorist Programs (GAO/T-NSIAD-00-145, Apr. 6, 2000).

Combating Terrorism: Need to Eliminate Duplicate Federal Weapons of Mass Destruction Training (GAO/NSIAD-00-64, Mar. 21, 2000).

Critical Infrastructure Protection: Comprehensive Strategy Can Draw on Year 2000 Experiences (GAO/AIMD-00-1, Oct. 1, 1999).

Combating Terrorism: Need for Comprehensive Threat and Risk Assessments of Chemical and Biological Attack (GAO/NSIAD-99-163, Sept. 7, 1999).

Combating Terrorism: Observations on Growth in Federal Programs (GAO/T-NSIAD-99-181, June 9, 1999).

Combating Terrorism: Issues to Be Resolved to Improve Counterterrorist Operations (GAO/NSIAD-99-135, May 13, 1999).

Combating Terrorism: Observations on Federal Spending to Combat Terrorism (GAO/T-NSIAD/GGD-99-107, Mar. 11, 1999).

Combating Terrorism: Opportunities to Improve Domestic Preparedness Program Focus and Efficiency (GAO/NSIAD-99-3, Nov. 12, 1998).

Combating Terrorism: Observations on Crosscutting Issues (GAO/T-NSIAD-98-164, Apr. 23, 1998).

Combating Terrorism: Threat and Risk Assessments Can Help Prioritize and Target Program Investments (GAO/NSIAD-98-74, Apr. 9, 1998).

Combating Terrorism: Spending on Governmentwide Programs Requires Better Management and Coordination (GAO/NSIAD-98-39, Dec. 1, 1997).

Combating Terrorism: Federal Agencies' Efforts to Implement National Policy and Strategy (GAO/NSIAD-97-254, Sept. 26, 1997).
