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Press Briefing on the West Coast Terrorist Plot by Frances Fragos Townsend, Assistant to the President for Homeland Security and Counterterrorism

Via Teleconference

12:24 P.M. EST

MS. TOWNSEND: Good afternoon, everybody. I thought I'd start with a general statement and then go to the West Coast plot.

The President's speech this morning was intended to stress the point that terrorism is a global problem requiring a global response, that uses all the tools of national and international power. We are facing a global terrorist network and that requires a global alliance to combat it. The United States cannot fight this alone. All the nations have a stake in the war and all have a part to play in the war on terror. As the President mentioned, we have a coalition of over 90 countries. Protecting American citizens requires the unprecedented cooperation of many nations. The President used the two examples of Saudi Arabia and Pakistan and their ongoing contributions and successes in the war on terror.

The speech makes the point explicitly that this cooperation is happening on a daily basis. With our partners abroad we have disrupted terrorist networks around the world and serious al Qaeda plots, including plots to attack inside the United States. We have done this using all instruments of national power, including extensive collaboration with our international partners.

The President today highlighted one example of a disrupted plot, in which al Qaeda intended to use a hijacked airliner to attack the West Coast of the United States. I should say, he used the phrase "Liberty Tower," that should have been "Library Tower." This plot is an instructive and chilling reminder of al Qaeda's global connections and their intention to attack our homeland. More importantly, it makes clear to the American public that there's an ongoing and effective international cooperation that is working to undermine al Qaeda's attempts to attack us. It also reminds us that we must continue to gather as much information as possible and from all sources, especially detainee debriefings and intelligence operations, to reveal the evolving terrorist networks and plots.

In telling the American public about this foiled plot, we have to be sensitive to the need to protect sources and methods since we are dealing with the ongoing threat from al Qaeda -- and you'll appreciate that's why the President doesn't name the countries, the particular allies or the particulars of the sources and methods to glean the operational leads that led to the disruption of the plot.

As you'll all recall, the September 11th attack was conceived as a broader plot than what was actually

executed. It was meant to include -- it was intended, in its initial, formative stages, to include by the East Coast and the West Coast plots. It was bin Laden who decided that it should just focus on the East Coast, and that the West Coast should be held in abeyance until there was a -- as a follow-on attack. It's our understanding now that it was too difficult to get enough operatives for both the East and West Coast plots at the same time.

Khalid Shaykh Muhammad was the individual who led this effort. He initiated the planning for the West Coast plot after September 11th, in October of 2001. KSM, working with Hambali in Asia, recruited the members of the cell. There was a total of four members of the cell. When they -- KSM, himself, trained the leader of the cell in late 2001 or early 2002 in the shoe bomb technique. You all will recall that there was the arrest of the shoe bomber, Richard Reid, in December of 2001, and he was instructing the cell leader on the use of the same technique.

After the cell -- the additional members of the cell, in addition to the leader, were recruited, they all went -- the cell leader and the three other operatives went to Afghanistan where they met with bin Laden and swore biat -- that is an oath of loyalty to him -- before returning to Asia, where they continued to work under Hambali.

The cell leader was arrested in February of 2002, and as we begin -- at that point, the other members of the cell believed that the West Coast plot has been canceled, was not going forward. You'll recall that KSM was then arrested in April of 2003 -- or was it March -- I'm sorry, March of 2003.

The ongoing cooperation between -- and information exchange between all of the international partners of the various countries involved in this operation permitted us to continue to get more leads, even after Hambali's arrest. And it permitted us -- even after KSM's arrest, I'm sorry. And that allowed us to follow the path of Hambali, who was ultimately arrested in August of 2003.

The case, I think more than anything, underscores the importance of real-time information sharing. And the fact is, if we don't -- by sharing the information, by working with others and sharing information real-time, while it can be a slow process -- you can see we unraveled this over a period of years, this information allows us to get the dots, as the 9/11 Commission put it. And it's only by collecting those dots and sharing them with each other, something that in isolation may not seem significant, we put together the picture that permits us to disrupt it. It is of critical importance that we build these relationships, that we foster these relationships of cooperation and trust with our allies. And, frankly, they've done nothing but get stronger since 9/11.

I also think that it's a reminder of the importance of detainee debriefings. It's only by getting this information and combining that with other sources and methods in the intelligence community that we can truly understand the intentions of our enemies and their tactics. And so we have to be careful to protect them, but that is one of the most important techniques that we have. I would also say while we have heard many criticisms of our intelligence community, this is an absolute success story of the intelligence community in general, and CIA, in particular.

Okay, with that, I'm ready to take questions.

Q Hello, are you there?

MS. TOWNSEND: Yes, I am.

Q Hello, how are you doing?

MS. TOWNSEND: Good, how are you?

Q Not too bad. Anyway, to start with, you said that the cell leader of the West Coast plot had been arrested. What about the other cell members? Can you give us any further details, number one? And, number two, you talked about the need and great successes of international cooperation. Can you comment in any way on recent events in Yemen, when perhaps the international cooperation fell down a little bit?

MS. TOWNSEND: Sure. I should have said it, and Mark, thank you for reminding me. All of the cell leaders were ultimately arrested and taken into custody. So there are none of the remaining -- none of the four are at large.

As regards Yemen, look, I will tell you I find the developments in Yemen not only deeply disappointing, but of enormous concern to us, especially given the capabilities and the expertise of the people who were there. We are disappointed that they were all housed together. We are disappointed that their restrictions in prison weren't more stringent. We have spoken with our colleagues in Yemen through our ambassador and expressed this to them and asked them for the strongest and most transparent cooperation so that we can help them.

We are also working with our allies in Saudi Arabia -- after all, Saudi Arabia had turned over a number of people to Yemen, back to Yemen, who were detained and now have escaped. And so our allies in Saudi Arabia face as great, if not a greater, threat by virtue of this escape than we do.

And so we're -- again, it's a good example of how we're going to approach this escape and work together with our allies.

Q I understand that the House Intelligence Committee was briefed yesterday on the NSA wire tapping program, and I understand that at least some of the members present asked either General Hayden or Mr. Gonzales why they couldn't tell more success stories. So it's interesting to me that news of this is coming out today. So my follow question is, did the NSA wire taps, did they play any role in any of these arrests that you talked about, and in disrupting this particular plot?

MS. TOWNSEND: As I said to you, we use all available sources and methods in the intelligence community, but we have to protect them. So I'm not going to talk about what ones we did or didn't use in this particular case. And I wasn't at the briefing yesterday, so I can't speak directly to that.

Q So you can't say that this is a direct result, a successful result of that initiative?

MS. TOWNSEND: I wouldn't say one way or the other. I wouldn't comment on it.

Q Hi. I had essentially the same question related to the NSA. Is there nothing at all that you can tell us in any regard as to whether the NSA surveillance was at all instrumental?

MS. TOWNSEND: No, I'm sorry, I can't. It continues to be a very sensitive program. It's resulted in successes, but I can't relate it in any way one way or another to this particular plot.

Q As a follow up, because certainly in the light of the hearings going on this week, and the criticism for this surveillance, it would seem that the President talking about a success story such as this sort of skirts the question of the NSA. Is it wrong for us to put two and two together?

MS. TOWNSEND: The point -- as I said in my opening statement, the point of the President's speech was to talk about the international cooperation. This was not meant to be a speech about the NSA surveillance program.

Q Okay. Thank you very much.

MS. TOWNSEND: Sure.

Q Hi Fran. Well, I was going to ask the same question you just got twice before, in general.

MS. TOWNSEND: Okay.

Q But talk about the timing of this bigger picture. I mean, we've known about this plot, in general, before. Why have the President talk about these new details -- declassified these new details, particularly at a time when you've got Porter Goss and other people saying that having intelligence information out there is harmful to gathering it? Why do that at this time?

MS. TOWNSEND: Well, I have to -- I'm smiling, if you could see me, because usually we get the question, why can't you declassify more? Now you want to know why we're declassifying it now.

What I would say to you is, the President is always looking for opportunities to share with the American people the details and the texture of the ongoing war on terror. He speaks about it frequently. The problem is you can't share these details when you have operational leads. And so we've got to be sure that we've used up all the operational leads from a particular case before we can -- and that's why I said it takes time, this unraveled over years, and there are still things you can see we're not talking about -- we're not talking about the countries, we've not named them, because, frankly, they don't want to be named. They are partners and we respect that, so we're not naming them.

And so it takes time. We try to do it as we get that information available, without compromising any operational interest we have.

Q Fran, just one other follow up. What we don't know is the time. Can you give us some more details

on the timeline on this -- meaning, you know, when, exactly, was this plot scheduled for? Do we know that?

MS. TOWNSEND: We don't know exactly when the plot was scheduled for. The intelligence tells us that Khalid Shaykh Muhammad began to initiate it in October of 2001. We know that between then and when the lead operative was arrested in February of '02, between those two periods of time, they traveled through Afghanistan, they met with bin Laden, they swore biat, they came back, and the lead guy is arrested, which disrupts it in February of '02. So you see what I'm saying? It's during that short window of time, between October of 2001 and February of 2002, but we don't know when they planned -- we don't know when it was planned to actually be executed.

Q Just a question on the timing. You said that the operatives and the leader met with bin Laden in early 2002 in Afghanistan; is that right?

MS. TOWNSEND: It's between October 2001 and February of 2002, when the leader is arrested.

Q But when did they meet with bin Laden in Afghanistan?

MS. TOWNSEND: Hold on, let me see. They're telling me the intelligence community believes it was in October.

Q Of 2001?

MS. TOWNSEND: Yes.

Q Before the U.S. invasion?

MS. TOWNSEND: Okay, hold on. I can't be that specific, because we don't know.

Q Okay. So you don't know whether or not they met with bin Laden in Afghanistan while U.S. forces were in the country?

MS. TOWNSEND: I don't know.

Q Okay.

Q Who was the cell leader that got arrested? Actually, I wouldn't mind having all the four names. And where were they caught?

MS. TOWNSEND: I can't speak to where they were caught. Let me see if I'm allowed to release any of the names. No, I'm sorry, the names all remain classified.

Q They haven't been made public at all, even though we've got lots of names out there -- Ramzi

Binalshibh, all those people?

MS. TOWNSEND: Well, the problem with that is, the fact that names may be out in the public doesn't make them declassified. And so we're not releasing the names of the cell leader or the other cell members.

Q Is there any connection between Richard Reid and this plot, or did they get the idea from Richard Reid? What came first?

MS. TOWNSEND: It's not clear what came first. It was clearly the same technique that they were intending to use, the shoe bomb. More than that, we don't have the intelligence to tell us whether the cells -- that is, Richard Reid and this cell -- knew each other or had contact with one another. We just don't know that.

Q And was it just one country that helped thwart this?

MS. TOWNSEND: No.

Q One South Asian country?

MS. TOWNSEND: No.

Q How many were there?

MS. TOWNSEND: Hold on, let me count. A total of four.

Q All in South Asia?

MS. TOWNSEND: Yes -- no -- hold on. Two in South Asia, two in Southeast Asia.

Q Thank you.

MS. TOWNSEND: Sure.

Q Hi, Fran.

MS. TOWNSEND: Hi, Elisabeth.

Q How are you doing?

MS. TOWNSEND: Good.

Q You know, I have the same question, but I thought I would try another way. You said here, the case,

I think, more than anything underscores the importance of real-time information sharing. That sure sounds like NSA to me. I mean, there's nothing you can -- what does that mean? Can you just talk about real-time information-sharing right there? You said that --

MS. TOWNSEND: Right, I did say that. But it doesn't -- it means close in time to when our liaison partners get it that they share it with us. That's what I mean when I say real-time information sharing. That is, you don't wait months, it's not a formal process. There is a period in time when we treated these as law enforcement matters; you had to file a formal written request through the Justice Department. Real-time information sharing means you've got a relationship, a trusting confidence where it moves intelligence service to intelligence service in close proximity to the time that's it's collected by either us or by our partners.

Q Okay, okay. And then, again, is there any other details -- you can't say where they were arrested, who they are? Can you tell us where they are?

MS. TOWNSEND: They're all in custody, but I --

Q I know --

MS. TOWNSEND: I know, but I can't tell you their names, because that would give it away, and I can't tell you the names of the countries because -- not because I care, but because our partners want to have it kept a secret.

Q Are they in the United States? Are they in Gitmo? I mean, can you give us any sense of --

MS. TOWNSEND: I can't.

Q Okay.

MS. TOWNSEND: Thanks.

Q What level of operational detail did this plot reach before it was foiled? I mean, was it -- were they planning to fly a plane out of LAX? Did it reach that level of detail?

MS. TOWNSEND: We didn't know what plane or what flight. We knew that they were going to fly a commercial airliner into the tallest building in California, or the West Coast. And there was an analytic judgment by the intelligence community that that meant the Library Tower. But, I mean, we didn't have a day or a week; we didn't know that.

Q Okay. And, also, you know, it seems like the plot, you know, was plotted out in South Asia or Southeast Asia, you know, the Cole bombing, apparently meetings took place there on that. What does that say about, you know, that area being used as, you know, sort of a meeting place to plot these things out?

MS. TOWNSEND: Well, I agree with you that it suggests that we have a real interest, an operational interest in disrupting things and looking there. The good news is we have strengthened our relationship throughout that region in South Asia and Southeast Asia with our partners since 9/11, and so we're able to work with liaison services to do these sorts of disruptions and have this sort of intelligence exchange. And that's much stronger than it was pre-9/11.

Q You had said before that the original 9/11 plot was meant to be both East Coast and West Coast, and I just wanted to sort of clarify: are you saying this is the West Coast part of the 9/11 plot that was moved to later?

MS. TOWNSEND: Yes, ma'am. Absolutely.

Q And following up on what Toby asked before, at the time last October when the President first revealed this plot there were a number of stories quoting anonymous counterterrorism sources as claiming that we shouldn't be claiming this as a disrupted plot because it never got far enough to be disrupted, and suggesting that the administration was claiming credit for more than had been accomplished. Can you respond to that?

MS. TOWNSEND: I think that -- I obviously don't know who the anonymous counterterrorism sources are. What I would say to you is -- suggest to you there are people who don't appreciate and truly understand what the timeline was. This was not only blessed, if you will, from bin Laden on down through Khalid Shaykh Muhammad, who was the operational chief at the time, but it showed the linkage through the terrorist network with Jemaah Islamiya -- JI -- it showed the relationship between the group. It required us to work with our international partners in the information exchange. It required information gleaned from detainee debriefings to be operationalized and turned around.

And you can see from the timeline the arrests, one by one, it's the cell leader, it's KSM, it's the members of the cell, it's ultimately Hambali. I mean, the chronology of it makes very clear that these people continued to plot against us not only past 9/11, but Hambali continued through JI and his operatives to plot other attacks. And so it was critical that they all be gotten and put in custody in order to disrupt potential attacks against the United States. So, I mean, there is no question in my mind that this is a disruption. And this is -- it's not about credit, it's about protecting the American people. And the American people are absolutely safer as a result of these arrests.

MS. PERINO: That will have to be our last question. Thanks, everybody, for participating.

MS. TOWNSEND: Thank you, everyone.

END 12:50 P.M. EST

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