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Federal homeland security officials on Tuesday warned that Al Qaeda terrorists may attempt a new round of suicide hijackings but cautioned that intelligence on the issue was uncorroborated and still being evaluated.

The counterterrorism agency has no plans to raise the nation's threat alert level from yellow, the midpoint on a five-level scale. It sent the warning to airlines and law enforcement officials Saturday "in an abundance of caution" and to make sure all security safeguards are in place, homeland security spokesman Gordon Johndroe said.

U.S. officials said their information about the possibility of such attacks came from several detained "senior" Al Qaeda operatives and from electronic intercepts. But they cautioned that detainees often engage in disinformation.

"We got intelligence saying Al Qaeda is trying to exploit what they perceive to be vulnerabilities in our aviation systems. They've studied what we've done and are trying to find ways to get around it," said a U.S. official who spoke on condition of anonymity. "So we just said [to the airlines], 'Take a look at what you have out there and make sure you don't have any gaps.' "

The warning said terrorists might be planning to mimic the Sept. 11 hijackers and use five-man teams to commandeer airplanes after takeoff and crash them into buildings.

"At least one of these attacks could be executed by the end of the summer 2003," the Homeland Security memo said, adding that "attack venues" might include Britain, Italy, Australia and the East Coast of the United States because of their concentration of government, military and economic targets.

The report added: "The hijackers may try to calm passengers and make them believe they were on a hostage, not suicide, mission. The hijackers may attempt to use common items carried by travelers, such as cameras, modified as weapons."

U.S. officials said they had no indications any such attacks were in the works. "No equipment or operatives are known to have been deployed to conduct the operations," the report said.

The State Department on Tuesday revised an existing "worldwide caution" for American travelers, in part to reflect the new intelligence about the perceived hijacking threat.

"Terrorist actions may include, but are not limited to, suicide operations, hijackings, bombings or kidnappings. These may also involve commercial aircraft," the revised statement said.

Credit: Times Staff Writer

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