

U.S. May Cut Air Marshals Despite Warning

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July 30, 2003

WASHINGTON - The Transportation Security Administration wants to reduce the number of air marshals to save money, even as the government is warning about the possibility al-Qaida may try more suicide hijackings.

The TSA is seeking approval from Congress to cut \$104 million from the air marshal program to help offset a \$900 million budget shortfall. It's unclear how many of the estimated several thousand air marshal jobs would be affected.

"When we are faced with more priorities than we have funding to support, we have to go through a process of trying to address the most urgent needs," TSA spokesman Robert Johnson said.

News of the air marshal program cutbacks come as the Department of Homeland Security is warning of the possibility of hijackings.

A copy of the advisory, obtained Tuesday by The Associated Press, suggests an attack could take place by the end of the summer. The warning said terrorists may use five-man teams to take over airplanes just after takeoff or before landing and crash them into buildings.

"The hijackers may try to calm passengers and make them believe they were on a hostage, not suicide, mission," said the warning, which was distributed over the weekend to airlines and law enforcement agencies said. "The hijackers may attempt to use common items carried by travelers, such as cameras, modified as weapons."

It suggested cities on the East Coast, in the United Kingdom, Italy and Australia as possible targets.

"No equipment or operatives are known to have been deployed to conduct the operations," the warning said.

Officials said the credibility of the threat was still being evaluated. But they noted there was no precise information on when or where such an attack could take place.

The national terrorist threat level remained at yellow, signifying an elevated risk of attacks. The five-level, color-coded system was last raised to orange, or high risk, for 11 days in May. Officials said they did not plan to raise it to reflect the possibility of suicide hijackings.

Some complained the government still was doing too little to alert the public and key industries to terror threats.

"Our concern is that there will be bulletins put out that will not be made available to us," said Capt. Jon Safley, president of the Coalition of Airline Pilots Association, a pilots union. Safley, who doesn't fly, said he hasn't been getting warnings and wasn't sure all pilots know when advisories pertaining to air travel are issued.

Jim Schwartz, director of emergency management for Arlington County, Va., which includes both Ronald Reagan (news - web sites) Washington National Airport and the Pentagon (news - web sites), said his agency had received no warning from Homeland Security. He said he would need more specifics before increasing security based on published reports.

The warning was based on information gleaned from interviews of at least one al-Qaida prisoner as well as intercepted communications, said one intelligence official, speaking on condition of anonymity. The information was developed in the past several weeks.

"Cognizant of changes in aviation security measures since Sept. 11, 2001, al-Qaida is looking for new ways to circumvent enhancements in aviation security screening and tightening immigration requirements," the warning said.

Homeland Security Department placed a statement on its Web site saying the advisory was transmitted after U.S. intelligence-gatherers "received information that al-Qaida continues to be interested in using the commercial aviation system in the United States and abroad to further their cause."

In response to the advisory, the State Department on Tuesday revised an existing caution for American travelers to reflect 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.