

Embassy Attacks Thwarted, U.s. Says; Official Cites Gains Against Bin Laden; Clinton Seeks \$10 Billion To Fight Terrorism

The Washington Post, A SECTION; Pg. A02
January 23, 1999
Vernon Loeb
899 words

U.S. intelligence and law enforcement agencies have prevented Osama bin Laden's extremist network from carrying out truck-bomb attacks against at least two American embassies since the bombings of U.S. embassies in Kenya and Tanzania more than five months ago, the Clinton administration's senior counterterrorism official said yesterday.

Richard A. Clarke, who occupies the recently created post of national coordinator of counterterrorism and computer security programs, also said U.S. officials do not believe that bin Laden, a Saudi millionaire now living in the mountains of Afghanistan, has acquired chemical or biological weapons despite his contacts with experts in the production of nerve gas and biological toxins.

"I think we've made life extraordinarily difficult for [bin Laden], but he's still there," Clarke said. "I think it is very difficult for him and his lieutenants to travel. I think it's very difficult for them to raise money or move money or move explosives."

Clarke's assessment came as President Clinton unveiled a \$ 10 billion budget proposal for fighting terrorism and protecting the nation's computer infrastructure from attack. "The fight against terrorism is far from over, and now terrorists seek new tools of destruction," Clinton said.

In a speech at the National Academy of Sciences, Clinton said his fiscal 2000 budget proposal includes \$ 1.4 billion for enhancing domestic readiness in the event of a chemical or biological terrorist attack, an increase of more than 50 percent since fiscal 1998, and \$ 1.46 billion for protecting the nation's computer systems.

Clinton proposed an array of initiatives in both areas, from new vaccine research to creation of a "Cybercorps" of government computer experts. He said those programs would come on top of \$ 7 billion in counterterrorism spending on intelligence, diplomatic security, military readiness and law enforcement, including a tripling of FBI resources since 1993.

"We are doing everything we can, in ways I can and ways that I cannot discuss, to try to stop people who would misuse chemical and biological capacity from getting that capacity," Clinton said. "This is not a cause for a panic. It is a cause for serious, deliberate, disciplined long-term concern."

Clinton, who took office one month before the 1993 World Trade Center bombing, has since issued three high-level directives making counterterrorism the nation's No. 1 priority.

The president's proposals drew immediate praise on Capitol Hill, where lawmakers have voted for large increases in spending on counterterrorism in response to the World Trade Center bombing, a sarin gas attack by the Japanese religious cult Aum Shinrikyo in 1995 and the bombing of the federal office building in Oklahoma City later that year.

Rep. Thomas J. Bliley Jr. (R-Va.), chairman of the House Commerce Committee, pledged his "full cooperation" but said that, if anything, Clinton's counterterrorism strategy does not go far enough, leaving "huge gaps in federal laws and regulations governing the possession, use and transfer of biological and chemical agents such as anthrax and sarin gas."

Clarke declined to go into detail on U.S. counterterrorism operations that he believes preempted the planned truck bombings at embassies in Africa and the Middle East. He would not say which embassies had been targeted, although U.S. officials previously disclosed that they had foiled an alleged attempt by bin Laden associates to blow up the U.S. Embassy in Uganda.

Clarke did provide new information in defense of Clinton's decision to fire Tomahawk cruise missiles at the El Shifa pharmaceutical plant in Khartoum, Sudan, in retaliation for bin Laden's role in the Aug. 7 embassy bombings.

While U.S. intelligence officials disclosed shortly after the missile attack that they had obtained a soil sample from the El Shifa site that contained a precursor of VX nerve gas, Clarke said that the U.S. government is "sure" that Iraqi nerve gas experts actually produced a powdered VX-like substance at the plant that, when mixed with bleach and water, would have become fully active VX nerve gas.

Clarke said U.S. intelligence does not know how much of the substance was produced at El Shifa or what happened to it. But he said that intelligence exists linking bin Laden to El Shifa's current and past operators, the Iraqi nerve gas experts and the National Islamic Front in Sudan.

Given the evidence presented to the White House before the airstrike, Clarke said, the president "would have been derelict in his duties if he didn't blow up the facility."

Clarke said the U.S. does not believe that bin Laden has been able to acquire chemical agents, biological toxins or nuclear weapons. If evidence of such an acquisition existed, he said, "we would be in the process of doing something."

Assessing U.S. counterterrorism policy to date, Clarke said it's no accident that there have been so few terrorist attacks on American soil.

"The fact that we got seven out of the eight people from the World Trade Center [bombing], and we found them in five countries around the world and brought them back here, the fact we can demonstrate repeatedly that the slogan, 'There's nowhere to hide,' is more than a slogan, the fact that we don't forget, we're persistent -- we get them -- has deterred terrorism," he said.

Washington Post Staff Writer

[Close Window](#)