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Remarks Following a Meeting on Improving Homeland Security

January 5, 2010

Good afternoon, everybody. I just concluded a meeting with members of my national security team, including those from our intelligence, homeland security, and law enforcement agencies involved in the security reviews that I ordered after the failed attack on Christmas Day.

I called these leaders to the White House because we face a challenge of the utmost urgency. As we saw on Christmas, Al Qaida and its extremist allies will stop at nothing in their efforts to kill Americans. And we are determined not only to thwart those plans but to disrupt, dismantle, and defeat their networks once and for all.

Indeed, over the past year, we've taken the fight to Al Qaida and its allies wherever they plot and train, be it in Afghanistan and Pakistan, in Yemen and Somalia, or in other countries around the world.

Here at home, our intelligence, homeland security, and law enforcement agencies have worked together with considerable success, gathering intelligence, stitching it together, and making arrests—from Denver to Texas, from Illinois to New York—disrupting plots and saving American lives. And these successes have not come without a price, as we saw last week in the loss of our courageous CIA officers in Afghanistan.

But when a suspected terrorist is able to board a plane with explosives on Christmas Day, the system has failed in a potentially disastrous way. And it's my responsibility to find out why and to correct that failure so that we can prevent such attacks in the future.

And that's why, shortly after the attempted bombing over Detroit, I ordered two reviews. I directed Secretary of Homeland Security Janet Napolitano to review aviation screening technology and procedures. She briefed me on her initial findings today, and I'm pleased that this review is drawing on the best science and technology, including the expertise of Secretary of Energy Steven Chu and his Department.

I also directed my Counterterrorism and Homeland Security Adviser, John Brennan, to lead a thorough review into our terrorist watch-listing system so we can fix what went wrong. As we discussed today, this ongoing review continues to reveal more about the human and systemic failures that almost cost nearly 300 lives. We will make a summary of this preliminary report public within the next few days, but let me share some of what we know so far.

As I described over the weekend, elements of our intelligence community knew that Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab had traveled to Yemen and joined up with extremists there. It now turns out that our intelligence community knew of other red flags, that Al Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula sought to strike not only American targets in Yemen but the United States itself. And we had information that this group was working with an individual who was known—who we now know was in fact the individual involved in the Christmas attack.

The bottom line is this: The U.S. Government had sufficient information to have uncovered this plot and potentially disrupt the Christmas Day attack. But our intelligence community failed to connect those dots, which would have placed the suspect on the no-fly list.

In other words, this was not a failure to collect intelligence; it was a failure to integrate and understand the intelligence that we already had. The information was there. Agencies and analysts who needed it had access to it. And our professionals were trained to look for it and to bring it all together.

Now, I will accept that intelligence, by its nature, is imperfect, but it is increasingly clear that intelligence was not fully analyzed or fully leveraged. That's not acceptable, and I will not tolerate it. Time and again, we've learned that quickly piecing together information and taking swift action is critical to staying one step ahead of a nimble adversary.

So we have to do better, and we will do better, and we have to do it quickly. American lives are on the line. So I made it clear today to my team, I want our initial reviews completed this week; I want specific recommendations for corrective actions to fix what went wrong; I want those reforms implemented immediately, so that this doesn't happen again and so we can prevent future attacks. And I know that every member of my team that I met with today understands the urgency of getting this right. And I appreciate that each of them took responsibility for the shortfalls within their own agencies.

Immediately after the attack, I ordered concrete steps to protect the American people: new screening and security for all flights, domestic and international; more explosive detection teams at airports; more air marshals on flights; and deepening cooperation with international partners.

In recent days, we've taken additional steps to improve security. Counterterrorism officials have reviewed and updated our terrorist watch list system, including adding more individuals to the no-fly list. And while our review has found that our watch-listing system is not broken, the failure to add Abdulmutallab to the no-fly list shows that this system needs to be strengthened.

The State Department is now requiring Embassies and consulates to include current visa information in their warning on individuals with terrorist or suspected terrorist connections. As of yesterday, the Transportation Security Administration, or TSA, is requiring enhanced screening for passengers flying into the United States from, or flying through, nations on our list of state sponsors of terrorism or other countries of interest. And in the days ahead, I will announce further steps to disrupt attacks, including better integration of information and enhanced passenger screening for air travel.

Finally, some have suggested that the events on Christmas Day should cause us to revisit the decision to close the prison at Guantanamo Bay. So let me be clear: It was always our intent to transfer detainees to other countries only under conditions that provide assurances that our security is being protected.

With respect to Yemen in particular, there's an ongoing security situation, which we have been confronting for some time, along with our Yemeni partner. Given the unsettled situation, I've spoken to the Attorney General and we've agreed that we will not be transferring additional detainees back to Yemen at this time.

But make no mistake: We will close Guantanamo prison, which has damaged our national security interests and become a tremendous recruiting tool for Al Qaida. In fact, that was an explicit rationale for the formation of Al Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula. And as I've always said, we will do so—we will close the prison in a manner that keeps the American people safe and secure.

Our reviews, and the steps that we've taken and will continue to take, go to the heart of the kind of intelligence and homeland security we need in the 21st century. Just as Al Qaida and its allies are constantly evolving and adapting their efforts to strike us, we have to constantly adapt and evolve to defeat them, because as we saw on Christmas, the margin for error is slim and the consequences of failure can be catastrophic.

As these violent extremists pursue new havens, we intend to target Al Qaida wherever they take root, forging new partnerships to deny them sanctuary, as we are doing currently with the Government in Yemen. As our adversaries seek new recruits, we'll constantly review and rapidly update our intelligence and our institutions. As they refine our tactics, we'll enhance our defenses, including smarter screening and security at airports and investing in the technologies that might have detected the kind of explosives used on Christmas.

In short, we need our intelligence, homeland security, and law enforcement systems, and the people in them, to be accountable and to work as intended: collecting, sharing, integrating, analyzing, and acting on intelligence as quickly and effectively as possible to save innocent lives, not just most of the time, but all of the time. That's what the American people deserve. As President, that's exactly what I will demand.

Thank you very much.

NOTE: The President spoke at 4:43 p.m. in the Grand Foyer at the White House. In his remarks, he referred to Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab, suspect in the December 25, 2009, explosive device incident on Northwest Airlines Flight 253. The Office of the Press Secretary also released a Spanish language transcript of these remarks.

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