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Al Qaeda Remains Dangerous, Intel Chief Tells Senate

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WASHINGTON, Feb. 5, 2008 – Al Qaeda and its affiliates remain the most pressing terrorist threats to the United States and its allies, the nation's top intelligence official told the Senate Intelligence Committee today.

Director of National Intelligence Michael McConnell gave the senators the intelligence community's annual unclassified threat assessment. He said the top success of the past year was "there was no major attack against the United States or most of our European, Latin American, East Asia allies and partners."

The retired Navy vice admiral said the fact that there were no attacks was not an accident; rather, U.S. intelligence officials worked with allied nations to unravel terrorist plots, he said. The United States and its allies continued to attack terror groups in the Middle East and Central Asia. Coalition allies in other parts of the world shared intelligence and actively worked against extremists.

Attacks worldwide against al Qaeda do take a toll on the terrorists, McConnell said. "The death last week of Abu Layth al-Libi, al Qaeda's charismatic senior military commander and a key link between al Qaeda and its affiliates in North Africa, is the most serious blow to the group's top leadership since the December 2005 death of then-external operations chief Hamza Rabia," he said.

Al Qaeda in Iraq suffered major setbacks in its drive to intimidate Iraqis and establish the country as al Qaeda's base of operations and planning. The group can still mount lethal attacks in Iraq, but it is hurt, McConnell said.

"Hundreds of AQI leadership, operational, media, financial, logistical, weapons, and foreign fighter facilitator cadre have been killed or captured," he said. "With much of the Sunni population turning against AQI, its maneuver room and ability to operate have been severely constrained."

The number of al Qaeda attacks in Iraq dropped by more than half by the end of 2007. "We see indications that al Qaeda's global image is beginning to lose some of its luster; nonetheless, we still face multifaceted terrorist threats," he said.

Al Qaeda continues to pose significant threats to the United States at home and abroad, and al Qaeda's central leadership based in the border area of Pakistan is its most dangerous component, McConnell told the senators.

In July, a national intelligence estimate said al Qaeda has been able to regenerate the operational capabilities needed to conduct attacks in the United States. The group used safe havens in Pakistan's federally administered tribal area to regroup and plan for new attacks.

"The FATA serves as a staging area for al Qaeda's attacks in support of the Taliban in Afghanistan as well as a location for training new terrorist operatives, for attacks in Pakistan, the Middle East, Africa, Europe and the United States," McConnell said. "It has lost many of its senior operational planners over the years, but the group's adaptable decision-making process and bench of skilled operatives have enabled it to identify effective replacements."

Al Qaeda leaders Osama bin Laden and Ayman Zawahiri continue to lead the terror group and focus on their strategic vision of confronting the United States and its allies with mass casualty attacks around the globe, McConnell said. "Although security concerns preclude them from the day-to-day running of the organization, bin Laden and Zawahiri regularly pass inspirational messages and specific operational guidance to their followers through public statements," he explained.

The director said al Qaeda is identifying, training and positioning operatives for an attack in the United States.

"While increased security measures at home and abroad have caused al Qaeda to view the West, especially the United States, as a harder target, we have seen an influx of new Western recruits into the tribal areas since mid-2006," McConnell said. "We assess that al Qaeda's homeland plotting is likely to continue to focus on prominent political, economic and infrastructure targets designed to produce mass casualties, visually dramatic destruction, significant economic aftershocks, and/or fear among the population."

McConnell said conventional explosives probably will be the most probable al Qaeda attack scenario. "That said, al Qaeda and other terrorist groups are attempting to acquire chemical, biological, radiological, and nuclear weapons and materials," he added. "We assess al Qaeda will continue to try to acquire and employ these weapons and materials; some chemical and radiological materials and crude weapons designs are easily accessible, in our judgment."

Al Qaeda affiliates pose problems from Africa to Southeast Asia, he said. Al Qaeda in the Lands of the Islamic Maghreb is the most active terrorist group in northwestern Africa. "We assess it represents a significant threat to U.S. and European interests in the region," he said.

The group focuses primarily on Algerian government targets, but the group has expanded its target set to include United States, United Nations and other interests, he said. "Improvements in (the group's) use of improvised explosive devices suggest the group is acquiring knowledge transmitted from extremists in Iraq," he said.

Al Qaeda also continues to plan to attack targets in Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Yemen and Bahrain.

The group's presence in Lebanon is growing, but it is diminishing in East Africa. McConnell said, and groups affiliated with al Qaeda continue to operate in Indonesia and in the Philippines.

Overall, the group is losing its luster with all but the most radical Muslims, McConnell said.

"The brutal attacks against Muslim civilians unleashed by (al Qaeda in Iraq) and (al Qaeda in the Mahgreb) and the conflicting demands of the various extremist agendas are tarnishing al Qaeda's self-styled image as the extremist vanguard," said he told the senators. "Over the past year, a number of religious leaders and fellow extremists who once had significant influence with al Qaeda have publicly criticized it and its affiliates for the use of violent tactics."