

FBI alerts Jewish groups to possible terror threat

■ The warning, not based on a specific threat, also cited possible attacks on fuel depots.

By Christopher Newton
Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The FBI warned yesterday that terrorists might be planning attacks on synagogues or Jewish schools using fuel tankers.

The warning was not based on a specific threat, but on interviews with captured al-Qaida and Taliban fighters who said such a plot had been discussed, a U.S. official said on condition of anonymity.

The advisory also cited possible attacks on fuel depots.

The interviews with al-Qaida and Taliban fighters did not reveal a target city or time, and Bush administration officials stressed the information was as unspecified and uncorroborated as intelligence that led to similar alerts about shopping malls and banks in recent weeks.

Nevertheless, President Bush said from Florida: "Any time we get any kind of threat that we think is serious, we'll put it out and people need to respond accordingly."

Jewish groups said they would take the warning seriously.

"It's not a time to panic, but it's better safe than late," said Rabbi Marvin Hier, dean of the Simon Wiesenthal Center in West Los Angeles.

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The center already had planned before the warning to increase security, he said.

Locally, security has been stepped up at some Jewish facilities.

Joshua R. Platt, senior communications specialist at the Columbus Jewish Federation, said local synagogues and school officials were notified about the warnings yesterday afternoon.

"We're not going to panic," he said. "God willing, it's a simple warning, and that's it. But in the wake of 9/11, we have to take these threats seriously."

Platt said the federation, synagogues and Jewish schools and centers in the Columbus area all have increased security since the terrorist attack.

That has included hiring private security companies to patrol grounds and working closely with the FBI and local police agencies.

"We need to respond but respond cautiously and appropriately, and at the same time enjoy our freedom — not just members of the Jewish community, but all Americans," Platt said.

There are eight synagogues and two Jewish schools in Franklin County.

Janet Schwarz, a staff member at the Columbus Torah Academy on the East Side, said the warning won't keep her from going to work or synagogue.

"It concerns me, but I can't live my life worrying about it," said Schwarz, 47, of Gahanna. "I'm no more scared of these warnings than I am of warnings about smallpox outbreaks."

The new advisory came as members of Congress questioned whether FBI Director Robert Mueller's plan to put 20 percent of agents on anti-terror duty goes far enough. Before Sept. 11, about 15 percent of the agents were on

such duty.

Mueller said that the shift is appropriate, but that he will revisit Congress if he needs to switch more agents.

"I think it is critically important that we not hurriedly go too far, too fast," he said. "I don't want to end up with agents assigned to counterterrorism but with inadequate responsibilities to support their time."

The warning about possible attacks on fuel depots, Jewish schools and synagogues was sent yesterday to police agencies nationwide.

U.S. intelligence officials think the al-Qaida network has used fuel tankers as weapons before. In Tunisia last month, a man is thought to have blown up a gas truck near a historic Jewish synagogue, killing 18 people.

Khalid Shaikh Mohammed, who is accused of masterminding the Sept. 11 attack, also is suspected of ties to that bombing, a U.S. official has said.

The advisory said terrorists might be interested in using fuel tankers, and, "Reporting indicates the possible targeting of fuel depots or Jewish schools or synagogues."

It encouraged law-enforcement agencies "to make contact with appropriate Jewish community representatives and officials and trucking and fuel-delivery facilities ... and emphasize the need to report suspicious activities or persons."

Since Sept. 11, federal officials have struggled to strike a balance with the alerts. They have been accused of withholding information from the public and of giving so many warnings that Americans might let down their guard.

The overall alert status is unchanged from Code Yellow, which is the third-highest stage of alert.

Under the FBI reorganization plan announced last month, 518 agents will shift from drug work and other areas to fighting terrorism.

Dispatch Staff Reporter Tiffany Latta contributed to this story.