Networking: Fingerprints of terrorists

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A Muslim terrorist places a bomb inside a mosque in Iraq. The bomb detonates, obliterating most of the building. But American military personnel, sifting through the debris, just moments later, find a doorknob with the scoundrel's fingerprints on it, from a door he opened to enter the facility. The prints are collected with digital technology, and sent via a wireless network, locally, in Iraq, and then across the globe via satellite to the Army's Biometric Fusion Center in Clarksburg, W. Va., near Washington, D.C.

There, Army agents, working with FBI counterparts, scan the prints, and compare them with a database of known terrorists, looking to determine if the killer was behind other bombings in Iraq, Afghanistan, or elsewhere in the world, experts tell United Press International's Networking.

"The benefits of biometrics are phenomenal," said Daniel Munyan, chief scientist at CSC's global security services identity labs, which has worked with several government agencies on biometric projects, and is headquartered in El Segundo, Calif.

Once the data is in hand, the military uses it for a number of apps. Just over a year ago, in December, 2004, terrorists struck a U.S. base in Mosul, Iraq, killing 14 soldiers. The attack was apparently perpetrated by a suicide bomber who came onto the base in the guise of an Iraqi civilian contractor for the Pentagon. To stop that kind of offensive, the Department of Defense is making foreigners who apply for jobs as contractors in Iraq submit to a biometric security scan. Their fingerprints

are checked against the government's databases of known terrorists -- before they are allowed to come on board. Then, they are issued a biometric smart card for ID. Every time they try to enter an American base, the card, which includes images of their fingerprints, is scanned against a database, and against their actual fingerprints, taken again, at that time, experts tell Networking.

"Certain forms are virtually impossible to fake," said Munyan.

The biggest issues for the military to deal with, when it comes to networked, biometric security, are gaining the cooperation of the job applicant, overcoming cultural differences and dealing with any questions of privacy rights, Munyan said.

There are other obstacles for the government, however, when it comes to catching terrorists in the field. "Fingerprinting and biometric tools might allow an intelligence agency to build a database of suspected terrorists, but the challenge of linking fingerprints to names and faces and building a model of the network would remain," said Bret Johnson, director of the homeland security and entrepreneurship center at Northwestern University, Evanston, Ill.

Some technology developers are working on that and related problems now, however. The developer, Identix Inc., is using a mobile identification system, which employs both fingerprint and facial identification technology. The system uses a patented, hand-held, wireless device. It can be used in the field by military personnel who capture terrorists in the field, scan their fingerprints and snap a picture of their faces, and "know who they are dealing with on a real-time basis," said Frances Zelazny, director of corporate communications at Identix, based in Minnetonka, Minn.

The thorniest problem for that system is the availability of reliable, in-

theater wireless communications networks. So local database storage is relied on if there is a wireless network shut-down, she said.

FBI personnel have been using computing technology in Afghanistan and at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, as well as in Iraq, though at the beginning of the war on terror, early in the Bush administration, they were relying on old-fashioned paper and ink fingerprinting when processing terrorist suspects, according to the developer Cross Match, based in Palm Beach Gardens, Fla.

Now, if a terrorist posing as a job applicant comes calling, he will be nabbed if his fingerprints were found on exploded bombs, or at the sites of terrorist atrocities around the world.