US spy chief: Plot against Wall Street foiled

June 18 2013, by Donna Cassata

House Intelligence Committee Chairman Rep. Mike Rogers, R-Mich. listens to testimony on Capitol Hill in Washington, Tuesday, June 18, 2013, by National Security Agency (NSA) Gen. Keith B. Alexander during the committee's hearing regarding NSA surveillance. (AP Photo/Charles Dharapak)

The U.S. foiled a plot to bomb the New York Stock Exchange because of the sweeping surveillance programs at the heart of a debate over national security and personal privacy, officials said Tuesday at a rare open hearing on intelligence—a set-piece for supporters of the snooping.

The House Intelligence Committee, led by lawmakers sympathetic to the extraordinary surveillance, provided a venue for officials to defend the once-secret programs. There was limited probing of claims that the collection of people's phone records and Internet usage has disrupted dozens of terrorist plots, and few details were volunteered.

Army Gen. Keith Alexander, director of the National Security Agency, said the two recently disclosed programs—one that gathers U.S. phone records and another that is designed to track the use of U.S.-based Internet servers by foreigners with possible links to terrorism—are critical. But details about them were not closely held within the secretive agency. Alexander said after the hearing that the documents accessed by Edward Snowden, a 29-year-old former systems analyst on contract to the NSA, were on a web forum available to all NSA employees.

He told lawmakers Snowden's leaks have caused "irreversible and significant damage to this nation" and undermined the U.S. relationship with allies.

When Deputy FBI Director Sean Joyce was asked what is next for Snowden, he said, simply, "justice." Snowden fled to Hong Kong and is hiding.

Intelligence officials last week disclosed some details on what they said were two thwarted attacks, one targeting the New York subway system, one a Danish newspaper office that had published the cartoon depictions of the Mohammad. On Tuesday, Alexander said more than 50 terrorist acts were averted because of the surveillance programs in question.

In one example, Joyce said the NSA was able to identify an extremist in Yemen who was in touch with someone in Kansas City, Missouri, enabling authorities to identify co-conspirators and thwart a plot to bomb the New York Stock Exchange. He said this was made possible by one of

the surveillance programs disclosed by Snowden, but he did not say which one.

Joyce also said a terrorist financier inside the U.S. was identified and arrested in October 2007 because of a phone record provided by the NSA. The individual was making phone calls to a known designated terrorist group overseas, Joyce said. He confirmed under questioning that the calls were to Somalia.

Alexander said the Internet program had helped stop 90 percent of the 50-plus plots he cited. He said just over 10 of the plots thwarted had a connection inside the U.S. and most were helped by the review of phone records. Still, little was offered to substantiate claims that the programs have been successful in stopping acts of terrorism that would not have been caught with narrower surveillance. In the New York subway bombing case, President Barack Obama conceded the would-be bomber might have been caught with less sweeping surveillance.

National Security Agency (NSA) Director Gen. Keith B. Alexander approaches the witness table on Capitol Hill in Washington, Tuesday, June 18, 2013, to testify before the House Intelligence Committee hearing regarding NSA surveillance. (AP Photo/Charles Dharapak)

Officials have long had the authority to monitor email accounts linked to terrorists but, before the law changed, needed to get a warrant by showing that the target was a suspected member of a terrorist group. In the disclosed Internet program named Prism the government collects vast amounts of online data and email, sometimes sweeping up information on ordinary American citizens. Officials now can collect phone and Internet information broadly but need a warrant to examine specific cases where they believe terrorism is involved.

Committee chairman Mike Rogers, a Republican, and Rep. C.A. Dutch Ruppersberger, the panel's top Democrat, said the programs were vital to the intelligence community and assailed Snowden's actions as criminal.

"It is at times like these where our enemies within become almost as damaging as our enemies on the outside," Rogers said.

Ruppersberger said the "brazen disclosures" put the United States and its allies at risk.

Committee members were incredulous about the scope of the information that Snowden was able to access and then disclose.

Alexander said Snowden had worked for 12 months in an information technology position at the NSA office in Hawaii under another contract preceding his three-month contract with Booz Allen.

From left, Deputy Attorney General James Cole; National Security Agency (NSA) Deputy Director Chris Inglis; NSA Director Gen. Keith B. Alexander; Deputy FBI Director Sean Joyce; and Robert Litt, general counsel to the Office of the Director of National Intelligence; prepares to testify on Capitol Hill in Washington, Tuesday, June 18, 2013, before the House Intelligence Committee hearing regarding NSA surveillance. (AP Photo/Charles Dharapak)

"Egregious, egregious leaks," Joyce said.

But after the hearing, Alexander said almost all of the documents Snowden leaked were on an internal online library.

"They are on web forums that are publicly available in the NSA," he said.

The general counsel for the intelligence community said the NSA cannot

target phone conversations between callers inside the U.S.—even if one of those callers was targeted for surveillance when outside the country.

This June 9, 2013 photo provided by The Guardian newspaper in London shows Edward Snowden, who worked as a contract employee at the U.S. National Security Agency, in Hong Kong. The Guardian newspaper says that the British eavesdropping agency GCHQ repeatedly hacked into foreign diplomats' phones and emails when the U.K. hosted international conferences, even going so far as to set up a bugged Internet café in an effort to get an edge in high-stakes negotiations. The Guardian cites more than half a dozen internal government documents provided by former NSA contractor Edward Snowden as the basis for its reporting on GCHQ's intelligence operations. (AP Photo/The Guardian, File)

The director of national intelligence's legal chief, Robert S. Litt, said that if the NSA finds it has accidentally gathered a phone call by a target who had traveled into the U.S. without the agency's knowledge, it has to "purge" that from system. The same goes for an accidental collection of any conversation because of an error.

Litt said those incidents are then reported to the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Court, which "pushes back" and asks how it happened, and what the NSA is doing to fix the problem so it doesn't happen again.

Deputy NSA Director Chris Inglis said a limited number of officials at the agency could authorize dissemination of information to the FBI related to a U.S. citizen, and only after determining it was necessary to understand a counterterrorism issue. Information related to an American who is found not to be relevant to a counterterrorism investigation must be destroyed, he added.

Alexander said 10 people were involved in that process, including himself and Inglis.

Citation: US spy chief: Plot against Wall Street foiled (2013, June 18) retrieved 19 April 2024 from https://phys.org/news/2013-06-spy-chief-plot-wall-street.html