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Statement of Ranking Member Bennie G. Thompson

Assessing Attacks on the Homeland: From Fort Hood to Boston

July 10, 2013 (Washington) – Today, Committee on Homeland Security Ranking Member Bennie G. Thompson (D-MS) delivered the following prepared remarks for the full Committee hearing entitled “Assessing Attacks on the Homeland: From Fort Hood to Boston”:

“Today, we will explore five terrorist incidents that have occurred within the United States since the attacks of September 11, 2001.

In June 2009, Carlos Bledsoe shot two people at an Army recruiting center in Little Rock Arkansas. He was found guilty and is serving a life sentence.

In November 2009, Nidal Hassan, a Major in the U.S Army opened fire at Fort Hood, Texas. Jury selection in his trial begins this week.

In December 2009, the Christmas Day bomber (Umar Abdul matallab) was arrested in Michigan after trying to detonate an explosive aboard a plane. He was convicted and is serving four life sentences in a supermax prison in Colorado.

In May 2010, Faisal Shahzhad tried to detonate a bomb in Times Square. He was convicted and is serving a life sentence in a Federal prison.

And finally, in April 2013, two bombs were detonated during the Boston Marathon, killing three people and wounding 260 individuals. One suspect is dead and the other is awaiting trial before a Federal court in Massachusetts.

So I would like to begin today’s hearing by pointing out the similarities in this limited selection of cases.

With the exception of the Boston Marathon bombing, each of these attacks was perpetrated by a lone actor. All of the attackers who have faced trial in the United States, have been convicted, and are serving lengthy sentences.

It appears that the people who committed these attacks were radicalized and turned to violence through contacts outside of the United States. In at least two cases, the primary means of violent radicalization appears to have come from online contacts. In at least three cases, the attackers were disillusioned and disgruntled young men.

It would seem that these cases stand for several propositions. First, the Federal court system is perfectly capable of handling terrorism cases. As a matter of fact, in 2009 alone, the Department of Justice charged more defendants with terrorism related charges than any other federal crime.

Second, because none of these cases was carried out by an organized group, it would seem that terrorists have changed their methods. They have shifted their focus to identifying and isolating particular individuals. A change in tactics by our adversary should cause us to change our response. Here, our response should focus on acts perpetrated by lone wolf violent extremists.

Third, because none of these attacks were carried out by an organized group, we can conclude that our efforts abroad have been successful in disrupting their networks.

Fourth, because these attacks involved violent radicalization of disillusioned young men, our focus should be on teaching state and local officials and community leaders to effectively engage and diffuse situations which may cause these roots of anger to grow. Prevention is likely to be more cost effective than surveillance, trials or wars.

And while this hearing focuses on attacks carried out by Muslim Americans, the lessons we should take from this hearing should not focus on any particular religious group.

Over 10 years after September 11th, we must expand our focus. By now, we should know that terrorist violence is not limited to any particular ideology or nation.

As the Southern Poverty Law Center reported in March 2013, the number of conspiracy-minded antigovernment "Patriot" groups on the American radical right reached an all-time high in 2012, the fourth consecutive year of growth. The Southern Poverty Law Center concludes that these groups will continue to grow and become more militant during President Obama's second term and due to the national debate on gun control measures.

So, it seems that if we are here to be proactive, we would take the lessons we have learned since September 11th and apply them to the evolving face of terror, both at home and abroad.

Additionally, if we are here to be proactive, we should focus on where the systems have failed, the vulnerabilities that remain and the constructive actions available to this Congress.

For instance, we need to understand why one of the accused Boston Bombers was listed in two Federal databases but was able to travel to Russia. We need to understand the best and most cost effective way to fix that problem.

In essence, we can point the finger or we can find the solution. The choice is ours.

In the past, we have not always chosen a deliberate path to problem solving. For instance, the Christmas Day bomber case exposed vulnerability in the checkpoint screening machines used at the airports. Even though that terrorist did not board a flight in the United States, the government spent about \$800 million on screening machines. Today, those machines have been removed from the airports because Americans decided that they were not willing to give up their privacy for security. A few years and \$800 million dollars later, I hope we have found a solution that allows us to preserve privacy while maintaining security.

Also, if we are here to be proactive, we need to understand that solutions cannot be reached without dialogue and an open discussion of the facts.

At least two of the cases we are here to examine have yet to be tried in a court of law. Once a verdict has been rendered by a jury, I hope we can look at the evidence in the Fort Hood and Boston Marathon cases. But at this point, our conclusions are likely to be premature and our discussion may undermine a conviction.

I am not willing to let anyone escape punishment because of words spoken in this room.

Mr. Chairman, I share your concerns about terrorism in this country since September 11th, and look forward to a full discussion of the actions that Congress should undertake to meet this challenge in a constructive and bipartisan manner."

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