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Memo warns of threat

Alert says 5 Mexicans headed to S.F. to sell explosives to Iraqi

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Despite assurances from government officials that the border with Mexico is secure, a Department of Homeland Security document obtained by the Daily Bulletin reveals that law enforcement officials are seeking five Mexican nationals suspected of bringing explosives into the United States.

The internal "Intelligence Alert" from the Office of Border Patrol -- issued to law enforcement officials Jan. 12 -- stated that the Mexican nationals were heading to San Francisco to sell the explosives.

But Department of Homeland Security spokesman Russ Knocke said the document is an internal memo and that there are doubts to the credibility of the threat.

"There is no reason to believe at this time that there is any specific threat involved," Knocke said. "Anytime there is specific threat information, we share that information with the parties involved."

The department passes on information to state and local authorities anytime there is specific or credible information, Knocke said.

"The intelligence, however, would be provided to state and local authorities through a completely different channel," he said.

The memo detailed specific information regarding San Francisco.

"The source stated that five individuals would attempt entry by foot with an unknown quantity of plastic explosives hidden in the soles of their shoes. The report indicated the group's final destination is San Francisco. Once in the city, they are to sell the explosives to an unknown Iraqi national," the memo stated.

On Jan. 11, at about 5 p.m., Tucson, Ariz.-sector headquarters received information from a "source of unknown reliability" that the five individuals would travel from Culiacan, Sinaloa, Mexico, en route to Nogales, Sonora, Mexico, according to the document.

The source also stated that the five individuals would be driving in a white Nissan Maxima that has Sonora license plates. The source indicated to law enforcement officials that one of the individuals is named Vicente Banuelos, who is a Mexican citizen from Mazatlan, Sinaloa, Mexico. The intelligence alert asked officials to watch for Banuelos - a photograph and fingerprints of a man by the same name were issued with the alert. But it is uncertain whether those are from the same individual authorities are seeking.

Officials with U.S. Customs and Border Protection, which is part of the Department of Homeland Security, would not comment on the documents late Friday evening.

"Our primary mission is to deny terrorists and their weapons from entering our border," said Michael Friels, spokesman with the agency. "As well, we continue our other mission of denying contraband from entering the U.S. Our agents on the front line of America's borders are committed 24 hours a day, seven days a week, 365 days a year to protecting this country."

The FBI's San Francisco field office could neither confirm nor deny Friday evening that it had received the alert.

"If DHS has that information, I'm sure they would have forwarded that to us," said a duty agent who would not identify himself. The agent referred questions to a media representative who was unavailable.

Border agents interviewed by the Daily Bulletin said security is so lax along Mexico's frontier that almost anybody

can get through.

"The alert is highly detailed, and it shows that our borders are not as safe as the government wants us to believe," said a border agent speaking on condition of anonymity.

Earlier this month, the Daily Bulletin obtained an "officer safety alert" memo, dated Dec. 21, that warned agents that drug and human smugglers intend to bring members of the international Mara Salvatrucha street gang, also known as MS-13, into the country to assassinate border agents.

And Monday, U.S. law enforcement officers in Sierra Blanca, Texas, had an armed standoff with what they believe were Mexican soldiers aiding drug smugglers across the Rio Grande, 50 miles east of El Paso.

Officials have called for investigations into Monday's confrontation, which came on the heels of a Daily Bulletin article that more than 200 incursions into the United States by the Mexican military have been documented over the past 10 years.

The Mexican government denied the incursions and on Thursday suggested that it may be American soldiers dressed as Mexican soldiers aiding the cartels.

Peter Gadiel, whose son James Gadiel, 23, died in the World Trade Center terrorist attack on Sept. 11, 2001, said administration and congressional leaders have abandoned border security.

"The president has said that only migrants are coming over the border to do jobs Americans won't do," Gadiel said. "Smuggling plastic explosives is clearly a job Americans won't do. The situation is so far beyond being absurd, and it looks like it won't change until more American lives are lost."

Gadiel, who testified before the 9/11 commission, said he wants no other family to suffer what he has and that Mexico's border must be secured. "The loss of my son, I can't put that into words," the Connecticut man said. "You simply can't have a border where anybody can cross and expect to have a secure country."

Border-watch activists say they are angry that security has been so lax since the 2001 attacks.

"This same president yesterday morning claimed that his most solemn duty is to protect the American people," said Andy Ramirez, with Friends of the Border Patrol, a Chino-based organization. "Now's his chance."

Staff writer Kenneth Todd Ruiz contributed to this report.

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