



Lawmakers criticize Bush on border security

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WASHINGTON (Reuters) -- Republican and Democratic lawmakers criticized President Bush Thursday for failing to hire enough agents to protect America's borders.

At a hearing of the House of Representatives subcommittee on immigration and border security, chairman John Hostettler noted that legislation passed by Congress last year authorized the addition of 10,000 new Border Patrol agents over the next five years.

"I was therefore deeply disappointed that his (Bush's) budget calls for an increase in Border Patrol agents of barely 10 percent of that called for by the Intelligence Reform and Terrorism Prevention Act," the Indiana Republican said.

That legislation was based on the recommendations of the commission that investigated the September 11, 2001, attacks on New York and Washington.

Peter Gadiel, whose son was killed in the World Trade Center, said he and other family members of victims were shocked to read that Bush's budget proposal last month included funding for only 210 additional Border Patrol agents.

"We, who lost so much on that day, simply cannot understand why some in our government are still questioning the need for adequate resources, especially manpower, to control who is permitted to enter our country," Gadiel said.

The issue also came up on Wednesday at a hearing of a Senate subcommittee on homeland security, where Vermont Sen. Patrick Leahy, a Democrat, complained that not one additional agent would be posted to patrol the 4,000-mile-long border with Canada.

Agents tripled

Robert Bonner, commissioner of U.S. Customs and Border Protection, acknowledged he could use more manpower, although the number of agents on the northern border had tripled since September 2001.

"We don't have enough agents; we don't have enough technology to give us the security we need. We need more agents and we need to do a smarter and a better job," he said.

At Thursday's hearing, Texas Democratic Rep. Solomon Ortiz said the southern border was under siege and there was a real possibility terrorists could exploit the holes.

"The Border Patrol will lose more than 210 agents to attrition -- the strength of the Border Patrol is dwindling," he said.

Just this week, Ortiz added, 24 agents were mobilized with the National Guard and sent to Iraq.

T.J. Bonner, a former border guard who chairs the labor union representing agents, said the Border Patrol stopped 1.2 million people last year trying to enter the country illegally.

"Frontline agents estimate that two to three times that number managed to slip by them," he said.

Bonner called the Bush budget proposal "shameful" and said morale in the force had never been lower.

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