



House Select Committee on Homeland Security **Democrats**

JIM TURNER, Ranking Member

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Statement of Congressman Jim Turner, Ranking Member, Select Committee on Homeland Security at a full committee hearing:

“Homeland Security Advisory System: Improving Preparedness through Effective Warning”

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Secretary Loy, let me congratulate you on your new position. The Deputy Secretary in any department is the person who makes sure that things get done. In this department, you will have your hands full, and I am pleased to see that you are on the job.

Mr. Brennan, welcome back. Thank you both for being here to discuss the Homeland Security Advisory System.

I have been closely observing the threat alert system closely over the past two years and have received threat briefings when the level has been raised to orange. After thinking about possible changes that could be made to the system, and seeing how the general public has is reacting over time to the warnings, my judgment is that this system should be eliminated.

The system we have today was created quickly after the September 11, 2001 attacks. It was the government’s first attempt to establish a national system to alert our citizens and our economic sectors about homeland security threats.

While the system may have initially served a useful purpose, it is not serving us well now.

Americans understand that we are fighting a long war on terror, often fought in the shadows, without a clear understanding of when or how we might be attacked. Therefore, our intelligence, law enforcement, and other security forces must remain vigilant, *at all times*. Specific threat advisories can help to target that vigilance, by increasing security measures in certain places and for certain sectors of the economy.

But the color coded threat alert system we have doesn’t meet these security needs.

First, we send very mixed messages. In December, we raised the threat level to ORANGE, but

told the American public not to change their plans or take any specific measures to protect themselves. This leaves the public confused and agitated with a system that causes them alarm but gives them no concrete guidance. Constantly raising and lowering the threat level is also making the public numb to the ongoing threat of terrorism. People need to know that they should be constantly alert to suspicious behavior that may be linked to terrorism.

Second, the color coded system is not providing threat information to the people that need it in order to take decisive action.

Our law enforcement, security, and emergency personnel don't need a color, they need the facts. If the governors and mayors of this country need to order additional security measures, they need credible, actionable intelligence from the federal government. However, as the GAO and Gilmore Commission have reported, state and local officials are not getting the specific information they need to do their jobs. They are looking for more help from the Department. Our state and local officials need to know the details before causing public concern and spending scarce dollars on unnecessary security measures.

In addition, the all-or-nothing nature of the current system fails to distinguish between areas and sectors of the economy that we believe are at a heightened risk. When the threat level is raised, a wide range of federal, state, local, and private sector protection plans go into effect, although the intelligence has not suggested that all sectors of our society are specifically threatened. State and local governments spend hundreds of thousands of dollars – perhaps millions – to defend against an amorphous threat.

Finally, we also need to consider whether the alert system is helping the terrorists more than it is helping us. When we raise and lower the threat level, we are also telling al Qaeda when we are strengthening our defenses, and then again when we are lowering our guard. I agree with the Chairman that this alert system may present a roadmap, broadcasting our vulnerabilities to those who would do us harm.

I recognize that the Administration faces a difficult dilemma. Our intelligence agencies gather a great deal of information, and very little of it relates to a specific attack. We should have a level of security deployed around the country that is appropriate in light of the ongoing, consistent threat of terrorism that we face. When we believe there is greater risk of attack, those who are able to take specific action should be advised. But issuing general alerts does not serve a useful purpose and may well be counterproductive.

I urge our witnesses and the Department to reform the threat alert system. We need to create a system that is flexible, gets actionable information quickly to the people that need to take action, and underscores the need for our citizens to remain vigilant in the face of the threats we face.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman, for calling this hearing. I look forward to the testimony of our witnesses today.

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