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Chairman Towns Calls for GAO Investigation into Terrorist Watch List

Committee will review critical homeland security issues including cybersecurity, deployment of secure ID cards

WASHINGTON – Chairman Edolphus “Ed” Towns (D-NY) today announced that he is calling for a Government Accountability Office (GAO) investigation into the terrorist watch list after the failed terror attack Christmas Day on American aviation. Chairman Towns is concerned about shortcomings in the nation’s homeland security system that the incident revealed, and is committed to working to resolve existing problems in order to keep Americans safe. The announcement appeared in a letter to Ranking Member Darrell Issa (R-CA).

Chairman Towns acknowledges in the letter that information sharing across agencies is a particular problem in homeland security, both historically and in relation to this recent incident. He is particularly troubled by the lack of integration between the watch lists and no-fly lists maintained by different federal agencies.

“Given the critical importance of this issue, I asked GAO to expedite their review of the terrorist watch list and report back to the committee as soon as possible. We need be sure that the system is adequately prepared to prevent any future attack,” said Chairman Towns.

Previously, GAO issued a report in October 2007 on the terrorist watch list. Chairman Towns is asking GAO to update it prior work on the terrorist watch list to help inform the committee’s oversight of national security issues.

In a request for investigation letter to Gene Dodaro, GAO’s Acting Comptroller General, Chairman Towns states that the committee “would like GAO to determine what major changes the federal government has made to the watch list process to address vulnerabilities identified by GAO, what is the impact of those changes, and what GAO recommendations, if any, have not yet been fully implemented.”

Chairman Towns also announced today that he is planning a review of two critical homeland security issues that are of particular relevance to the Committee on Oversight and Government Reform. The issues include improving cybersecurity in the federal government, and the deployment of secure ID cards under REAL ID and other programs.

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Text of Chairman Towns' letter to Ranking Member Issa:

Wednesday, January 6, 2010

The Honorable Darrell Issa
Ranking Minority Member
Committee on Oversight and Government Reform
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, D.C. 20515

Dear Mr. Issa: Thank you for your letters requesting that the Committee conduct an investigation and hold hearings related to the recent failed attempted terrorist attack on American aviation. I share your concerns about this incident, and assure you that I am committed to working to resolve the shortcomings in our homeland security system that this incident revealed, so that we may keep Americans safe.

I am encouraged that the Obama Administration is recognizing that the system should have prevented this attack, and has taken immediate action to correct deficiencies, rather than engage in denial or political bluster. I am also encouraged by your endorsement of a strong federal role in preventing terrorist incidents, given that you have previously stated that 9/11 was "simply" a plane crash that should be the responsibility of local authorities.

As you note, this Committee held several hearings in the 107th and 108th Congress to improve interagency cooperation in combating terrorism and to create the Department of Homeland Security. At that time, this Committee was in a unique position to oversee the cross-agency issues surrounding homeland security. As you know, however, a key recommendation of the 9/11 Commission was that Congress consolidate oversight of the Department of Homeland Security. The House of Representatives implemented this recommendation by establishing the Committee on Homeland Security as a permanent standing committee of the House.

Accordingly, I will coordinate our committee's review of this incident with the Committee on Homeland Security, along with other committees such as the Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence, to ensure a thorough review without unnecessary duplication that could distract DHS from its important mission.

I fully concur with your observation that information sharing across agencies is a particular problem in homeland security, both historically and in relation to the most recent incident. I am particularly troubled by the lack of integration between the watch lists and no-fly lists maintained

by different federal agencies. As an initial step, I have asked the Government Accountability Office to update its prior work on this issue to identify what major changes the federal government has made to address vulnerabilities identified by GAO, the impact of those changes, and what GAO recommendations, if any, have not been fully implemented.

In this session, I am planning a review of two critical homeland security issues that are of particular relevance to this committee due to our legislative jurisdiction – improving cybersecurity in the federal government, and the deployment of secure ID cards under REAL ID and other programs.

I appreciate your offer to join together in “developing an effective and bipartisan oversight strategy” to review our nation’s homeland security policy. I believe the best way to accomplish this is to avoid partisan finger-pointing and leaks to the press, and for us to meet and discuss our shared policy goals.

Sincerely,

Edolphus Towns
Chairman