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Day of violence in Mideast



Neglected computers hamper FBI

Ancient systems slow investigations

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1 WASHINGTON — FBI agents, members of the world's top law-enforcement agency, cannot send e-mail outside the bureau from their own computers. They cannot access the Internet from their desks, use current software programs or even connect to the FBI's own databases.

2 Robert Mueller, who was confirmed by the Senate last week as the next FBI director, must address the aftermath of headline-grabbing debacles such as the Robert Hanssen spy case. But an equal challenge will be repairing an aging computer system that has been neglected for years.

3 Throughout the bureau's 700 offices, investigations are routinely slowed, and crucial information missed, while data is downloaded on these ancient systems, insiders say. Processes that many teenagers could perform at home in minutes take the nation's top investigators hours.

4 "The average person in America would think the FBI, as the premier law-enforcement agency, would have top-of-the-shelf automation, but they are far from it," said William Esposto, the bureau's deputy director in the late 1990s. "The system definitely needed upgrading and it was a frustration on the part of a lot of people, at both management level and agent level, as to why this could not happen sooner and faster."

5 The aging computer system is more than an inconvenience. Better automation could have avoided such recent FBI embarrassments as the loss of hun-

(2)

FBI: Agency's big budget spent elsewhere

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

dreds of guns and laptop computers and the mishandling of documents that delayed the execution of Oklahoma City bomber Timothy McVeigh, experts say.

Some critics even assert that the FBI could have caught Hansen earlier if its computer system had been better designed. On a daily basis, investigators clearly could complete far more investigations if their computers worked faster, and agents say they find themselves going to stakeouts or interviews without crucial information.

"Not every agent has access to an Internet terminal," said Nancy Savage, president of the FBI Agents Association. "Some of our smaller offices don't even have Internet access. We don't always have the ability to transfer photographs. Those kinds of things are basic to law enforcement now."

Bureau leaders concede there are numerous computer problems, but say they are working hard to fix them.

Mueller said at his confirmation hearing last week that he is determined to bring the FBI up to speed technologically.

Bob Dies, a 30-year veteran of IBM, was brought in a year ago to renovate the bureau's computer systems. But Dies said the FBI is so far behind that even when his upgrading is finished in two years, its technology will not approach the level taken for granted by most companies.

The neglect of the FBI's computers can be traced to several

factors, according to knowledgeable observers inside and outside the bureau.

The FBI certainly has not suffered from a lack of funds; its budget has exploded to \$3.4 billion from \$2 billion in 1994.

But the money has gone to flashier causes, such as operating more than 40 FBI offices overseas—19 of which have opened in the last five years—rather than the mundane work of upgrading computers.

Some say Congress has not allocated enough money for technology. Others say it did, but the FBI had to divert the money to costly, high-profile investigations.

Technology a low priority

Former FBI Director Louis Freeh and his lieutenants clearly placed little priority on technology until it threatened to erupt into a crisis. Computer specialists inside the FBI aggravated the problem by being slow

to bring problems to Freeh's attention, said current and former agents.

"There is absolutely no reason for this," said Sen. Patrick Leahy (D-Vt.), chairman of the Senate Judiciary Committee.

"The FBI has had an extraordinary increase in its budget. It's a lack of management. It's an attitude of some that 'We are the FBI and we have done it in this way for a long time, and this is how we are going to do it,'" Leahy said.

Dies said he is appalled at the state of the bureau's technology. "The agents are better than I thought," Dies said. "The technology on the other hand, is worse than I thought. And I had a very low expectation level."

He cited one FBI satellite office with 30 employees that is connected to the outside world with a single, slow computer line.

Dies persuaded Congress last fall to allocate \$300 million to up-

grade the FBI's computers, networks and applications. While that should bring the bureau to a basic functioning level, Dies said, the FBI still lag will far behind the rest of the world.

"They have been starved for support for so long they don't know what to ask for," Dies said. The bureau's computer networks are so bad, he said, that they are forcing the FBI to use primitive computer programs because that is all they can support.

Primitive programs

When the typical agent turns on a computer, it displays not the multi-colored screen familiar to many—with its landscape of toolbars, boxes, browsers and icons—but a green-and-black screen that was obsolete a decade ago.

The FBI's internal system does not connect with the outside at all, which is why agents cannot access the Internet or

send e-mail.

Most FBI offices do have a few separate computers that link with the outside, but they have to be shared. The 10 agents in the FBI's office in Eugene, Ore., for example, share a single e-mail account.

Robert Castelli, a professor at John Jay College of Criminal Justice in New York, said such problems are troubling.

As criminals become adept at using computers for embezzlement, pornography and other high-tech wrongdoing, it is essential for investigators to keep up, he said.

"We used to do this with paper and pencil, pocket calculators and slide rules," Castelli said.

"But crime is becoming more sophisticated, especially white-collar crime and computer crime, which is one of the largest growing areas of crime and one of the hardest to investigate. Therein lies the situation they are faced with."