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Bush administration eliminating 19-year-old international terrorism report

By Jonathan S. Landay
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WASHINGTON - The State Department decided to stop publishing an annual report on international terrorism after the government's top terrorism center concluded that there were more terrorist attacks in 2004 than in any year since 1985, the first year the publication covered.

Several U.S. officials defended the abrupt decision, saying the methodology the National Counterterrorism Center used to generate statistics for the report may have been faulty, such as the inclusion of incidents that may not have been terrorism.

Last year, the number of incidents in 2003 was undercounted, forcing a revision of the report, "Patterns of Global Terrorism."

But other current and former officials charged that Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice's office ordered "Patterns of Global Terrorism" eliminated several weeks ago because the 2004 statistics raised disturbing questions about the Bush's administration's frequent claims of progress in the war against terrorism.

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U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice.

"Instead of dealing with the facts and dealing with them in an intelligent fashion, they try to hide their facts from the American public," charged Larry C. Johnson, a former CIA analyst and State Department terrorism expert who first disclosed the decision to eliminate the report in The Counterterrorism Blog, an online journal.

Rep. Henry Waxman, D-Calif., who was among the leading critics of last year's mix-up, reacted angrily to the decision.

"This is the definitive report on the incidence of terrorism around the world. It should be unthinkable that there would be an effort to withhold it - or any of the key data - from the public. The Bush administration should stop playing politics with this critical report."

A senior State Department official, speaking on condition of anonymity because of the sensitivity of the issue, confirmed that the publication was being eliminated, but said the allegation that it was being done for political

reasons was "categorically untrue."

According to Johnson and U.S. intelligence officials familiar with the issue, statistics that the National Counterterrorism Center provided to the State Department reported 625 "significant" terrorist attacks in 2004.

That compared with 175 such incidents in 2003, the highest number in two decades.

The statistics didn't include attacks on American troops in Iraq, which President Bush as recently as Tuesday called "a central front in the war on terror."

The intelligence officials requested anonymity because the information is classified and because, they said, they feared White House retribution. Johnson declined to say how he obtained the figures.

Another U.S. official, who also requested anonymity, said analysts from the counterterrorism center were especially careful in amassing and reviewing the data because of the political turmoil created by last year's errors.

Last June, the administration was forced to issue a revised version of the report for 2003 that showed a higher number of significant terrorist attacks and more than twice the number of fatalities than had been presented in the original report two months earlier.

The snafu was embarrassing for the White House, which had used the original version to bolster President Bush's election-campaign claim that the war in Iraq had advanced the fight against terrorism.

U.S. officials blamed last year's mix-up on bureaucratic mistakes involving the Terrorist Threat Integration Center, the forerunner of the National Counterterrorism Center.

Created last year on the recommendation of the independent commission that investigated the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, the center is the government's primary organization for analyzing and integrating all U.S. government intelligence on terrorism.

The State Department published "Patterns of Global Terrorism" under a law that requires it to submit to the House of Representatives and the Senate Foreign Relations Committee a country-by-country terrorism assessment by April 30 each year.

A declassified version of the report has been made public since 1986 in the form of a glossy booklet, even though there was no legal requirement to produce one.

The senior State Department official said a report on global terrorism would be sent this year to lawmakers and made available to the public in place of "Patterns of Global Terrorism," but that it wouldn't contain statistical data.

He said that decision was taken because the State Department believed that the National Counterterrorism Center "is now the authoritative government agency for the analysis of global terrorism. We believe that the NCTC should compile and publish the relevant data on that subject."

He didn't answer questions about whether the data would be made available to the public, saying, "We will be consulting (with Congress) … on who should publish and in what form."

Another U.S. official said Rice's office was leery of the methodology the National Counterterrorism Center used to generate the data for 2004, believing that analysts anxious to avoid a repetition of last year's undercount included incidents that may not have been terrorist attacks.

But the U.S. intelligence officials said Rice's office decided to eliminate "Patterns of Global Terrorism" when the counterterrorism center declined to use alternative methodology that would have reported fewer significant attacks.

The officials said they interpreted Rice's action as an attempt to avoid releasing statistics that would contradict the administration's claims that it's winning the war against terrorism.

To read past "Patterns of Global Terrorism" reports online, go to www.mipt.org/Patterns-of-Global-Terrorism.asp

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