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LATIN AMERICA

Crime networks, terrorists linked

A U.S. official said al Qaeda and other terrorist groups have ties to criminal organizations in Latin America.

BY JOSHUA GOODMAN
Associated Press

BOGOTA - Middle Eastern terrorist groups rely on criminal organizations in Latin America to acquire false passports and raise funds, although there is no evidence they operate directly in the region, a U.S. State Department anti-terrorism official said Thursday.

"We are not aware of any operational cells in this hemisphere by al Qaeda, Hezbollah or Hamas," said Harry Crumpton, antiterrorism coordinator at the U.S. State Department. "But we do have information that these organizations raise money in the hemisphere and are tied in to transnational criminal networks."

The U.S. official was in Bogotá for a three-day meeting of the Inter-American Committee Against Terrorism, or CICTE for its initials in Spanish, a gathering of antiterrorism officials from 34 nations sponsored by the Organization of American States.

INCREASED EFFORTS

In the wake of the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, the United States has boosted efforts to identify and arrest terrorists before they reach American shores.

While most of the attention has focused on the Middle East, lax border controls and widespread corruption is believed to make Latin America vulnerable to infiltration by terrorist groups seeking recruits and money to plan future attacks.

To enhance the region's security, the United States was pledging an additional \$2.25 million to strengthen and expand port, airport, land border and document security activities, as well as training for Customs officials, Crumpton said.

BIGGEST CONTRIBUTION

The contribution -- the equivalent of about \$65,000 for each nation in the hemisphere -- barely registers in the overall war on terror. But it's the United State's biggest contribution yet to the multilateral antiterror effort, a \$400,000 increase over last year's commitment, representing 80 percent of the funds raised by CICTE, Crumpton said.

Although Crumpton said terrorist groups had no tactical base in Latin America, he also said links with transnational criminal organizations for the purpose of fundraising were increasing and "posed a great threat" to

regional security.

U.S. officials suspect the lawless, porous border region of Argentina, Brazil and Paraguay is a haven for fundraising for Islamic militant groups.

In Colombia, officials in January arrested four Jordanians and a Palestinian belonging to a false passport ring that they said may have had links to al Qaeda.

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