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U.S. Figures Show Sharp Global Rise In Terrorism

State Dept. Will Not Put Data in Report

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The number of serious international terrorist incidents more than tripled last year, according to U.S. government figures, a sharp upswing in deadly attacks that the State Department has decided not to make public in its annual report on terrorism due to Congress this week.

Overall, the number of what the U.S. government considers "significant" attacks grew to about 655 last year, up from the record of around 175 in 2003, according to congressional aides who were briefed on statistics covering incidents including the bloody school seizure in Russia and violence related to the disputed Indian territory of Kashmir.

Terrorist incidents in Iraq also dramatically increased, from 22 attacks to 198, or nine times the previous year's total -- a sensitive subset of the tally, given the Bush administration's assertion that the situation there had stabilized significantly after the U.S. handover of political authority to an interim Iraqi government last summer.

The State Department announced last week that it was breaking with tradition in withholding the statistics on terrorist attacks from its congressionally mandated annual report. Critics said the move was designed to shield the government from questions about the success of its effort to combat terrorism by eliminating what amounted to the only year-to-year benchmark of progress.

Although the State Department said the data would still be made public by the new National Counterterrorism Center (NCTC), which prepares the information, officials at the center said no decision to publish the statistics has been made.

The controversy comes a year after the State Department retracted its annual terrorism report and admitted that its initial version vastly understated the number of incidents. That became an election-year issue, as Democrats said the Bush administration tried to inflate its success in curbing global terrorism after the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks.

"Last year was bad. This year is worse. They are deliberately trying to withhold data because it shows that as far as the war on terrorism internationally, we're losing," said Larry C. Johnson, a former senior State Department counterterrorism official, who first revealed the decision not to publish the data.

After a week of complaints from Congress, top aides from the State Department and the NCTC were dispatched to the Hill on Monday for a private briefing. There they acknowledged for the first time the increase in terrorist incidents, calling it a "dramatic uptick," according to participants and a letter to Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice from Rep. Henry A. Waxman (D-Calif.).

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The administration aides sought to explain the rise in attacks as the result of more inclusive methodology in counting incidents, which they argued made year-to-year comparisons "increasingly problematic," sources said.

In his letter urging Rice to release the data, Waxman said that "the large increases in terrorist attacks reported in 2004 may undermine administration claims of success in the war on terror, but political inconvenience has never been a legitimate basis for withholding facts from the American people."

Both Republican and Democratic aides at the meeting criticized what a GOP attendee called the "absurd" explanation offered by the State Department's acting counterterrorism chief, Karen Aguilar, that the statistics are not relevant to the required report on trends in global terrorism. "It's absurd to issue a report without statistics," said the aide, who is not authorized to speak publicly on the matter. "This is a self-inflicted wound by the State Department."

Aguilar, according to Hill aides, told them that Rice decided to withhold the statistics on the recommendation of her counselor, Philip D. Zelikow. He was executive director of the Sept. 11 commission that investigated the terrorist attacks on the United States.

The terrorism statistics provided to the congressional aides were not classified but were stamped "for official use only." Last week, State Department spokesman Richard A. Boucher said the government would publish "all the facts," but at Monday's session Aguilar told the staff members that even if the NCTC decided not to release the data, the State Department would not reconsider and publicly do so itself.

A State Department spokesman said last night that he is confident the data will be officially released. He said the government is committed to "providing the public all the information it needs to have an informed debate on this issue."

Under the standards used by the government, "significant" terrorist attacks are defined as those that cause civilian casualties or fatalities or substantial damage to property. Attacks on uniformed military personnel such as the large number of U.S. troops stationed in Iraq are not included.

The data provided to the congressional aides also showed terrorist attacks doubling over the previous year in Afghanistan, to 27 significant incidents, and in Israel, Gaza and the West Bank, where attacks rose to about 45, from 19 the year before. Also occurring last year were such deadly attacks as the seizure of a school in Beslan, Russia, by Chechen militants that resulted in at least 330 dead, and the Madrid train bombings that left nearly 200 dead.

The State Department did not disclose to the aides the overall number of those killed in incidents last year. Johnson said his count shows it was well over 1,000.

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