



Friends Of The Border Patrol

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PO Box 572, Chino, CA 91708 • TEL: (909) 476-1125

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Ramirez trip to White House quickly canceled

Sara A. Carter, Daily Bulletin Staff Writer

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A local Border Patrol supporter's invitation to attend an official briefing on global terrorism with Vice President Dick Cheney in the White House was rescinded almost as quickly as it was delivered.

Andy Ramirez, chairman of Friends of the Border Patrol, a Chino-based nonprofit organization, testified Wednesday in San Diego before the Subcommittee on International Terrorism and Non-proliferation.

Just before his testimony, he received a call from the White House Office of Public Liaisons, asking him to attend a national security briefing with the vice president on July 13. The call was followed by an e-mailed invitation Thursday morning.

Later that same day, a White House public liaison officer called Ramirez and told him his portion of the briefing had been cut from Cheney's meeting agenda. Officials with the White House liaison office said they would invite him to future briefings, Ramirez said.

White House spokesman Peter Watkins said only that the immigration portion of the briefing had been canceled by the Office of Public Liaisons.

"I don't understand why they canceled the briefing if border security is such a high priority," Ramirez said. "While I was humbled and honored, it just goes to show that we can't get this administration to talk with people who are not afraid to tell the truth."

Part of what Ramirez wanted to tell the vice president included information he obtained this year while working with agents on the U.S.-Canada border, he said.

During his testimony Wednesday, Ramirez revealed what Border Patrol agents described as an "in-house" project to monitor nearly 100 percent of the Great Lakes waterways, spanning three Border Patrol sectors. His information was confirmed in U.S. Customs and Border Protection documents obtained by the Daily Bulletin.

Officials with the Department of Homeland Security did not return numerous phone calls Thursday seeking comment about the project.

Project Athena, a surveillance system developed by Raytheon Corp., would have been an effective tool in combating terrorism because it could monitor shipping and boating in the entire Great Lakes area, the documents stated.

The northern border poses a substantial security challenge for the U.S. government, as 90 percent of the Canadian population lives within 100 miles of the U.S. border, the documents said. Major Canadian border cities include Vancouver, British Columbia; Toronto; and Montreal.

According to a U.S. Customs and Border Protection PowerPoint presentation dated Aug. 30, 2005, Project Athena had a successful 23-day test on Lake Erie near Buffalo, N.Y. During the operation, the high-tech equipment tracked 3,552 boats and even low-flying planes, which surprised the project managers, who did not expect the water-oriented radar to track aircraft, the documents stated.

Buffalo Assistant Chief Patrol Agent Greg Mish said that the project, which was also known as Operation Lakeview, started last summer.

"We just found out that our little operation has garnered media attention," Mish said. "We need a little bit of time before we respond to this."

The PowerPoint presentation showed that the surveillance system would be an effective tool in combating terrorism. In addition to radar and numerous cameras, the project used high-tech computer software, sensors and Global Information System mapping devices.

During the past several years, Congress has authorized funding for about 1,000 Border Patrol agents to cover more than 5,000 square miles of U.S./Canadian border. But the actual number of agents is much less. In the Buffalo sector, manpower is down 20 percent, and just 102 agents work in the sector, according to a Buffalo Border Patrol agent who requested anonymity.

Congressional testimony by numerous government witnesses in the past year suggests the Canadian border, which has been used by would-be terrorists in the past -- including Ahmed Rassam, the so-called Millennium Bomber -- poses a serious national security risk to the United States.

The Athena Project was dismantled after testing, said former Buffalo Deputy Chief Patrol Agent Ed Duda, a 30-year Border Patrol veteran who retired in March.

"I thought it was an effective project, and it worked," Duda said. "Water boundaries have always been the hardest to detect. Land boundaries you can monitor with ground sensors and physical surveillance, but the Great Lakes you can't.

"This last operation had some really good potential to monitor the waterways, and I don't know why the project wasn't continued."

Duda said that the project was the best option for monitoring the northern border.

Ramirez said in his Wednesday testimony that Border Patrol officials have asked that the project or something like it be put in place at Great Lakes Border Patrol sectors.

Watkins, the White House spokesman, said President Bush is paying close attention to the border hearings and hopes immigration reform can be achieved.

"He knows this is an issue that affects every American citizen," Watkins said. "The president is committed to making sure our border is secure, beginning with the temporary deployment of the National Guard troops. A secure border is critical in resolving the immigration problem and terrorism.

"The president is interested in working with Congress, and paying attention to these hearings is part of that."