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Color Put to Terrorist Threat

by Ron Fournier

Washington--America is on yellow alert, facing a "significant risk of terrorist attacks," homeland security chief Tom Ridge said Tuesday as he announced a color-coded system designed to end confusion over terror warnings.

It will be years before the nation sees green--the lowest threat level--because terrorism may be "a permanent condition" in America, Ridge said.

Ridge and Attorney General John Ashcroft have issued four terror warnings since the Sept. 11 hijackings, and local officials have complained the assessments were too vague. Bush advisers feared that the public was getting frustrated with the broad alarms.

"What we're trying to do is work with the states and local communities (and) also the private sector so we have a common vocabulary," the former Pennsylvania governor said in describing the new system in a speech to the National League of Cities.

The new system ranks threats by colors, starting with green at the bottom and followed by blue, yellow, orange and red as perceived dangers intensify. The warning level can be upgraded for the entire country or for specific regions and economic sectors--such as the nuclear industry, Ridge said.

The system's guidelines give government officials advice on what to do as threats grow, but no such guidance is offered for the general public.

Ridge said the system is designed to motivate local leaders to develop **emergency** response plans that would include ways to inform private citizens about how to react to attacks.

Many of the nation's governors, mayors and police praised Ridge's effort and pledged to support it, though some said there were still holes. Ridge can't require local governments to participate.

"This is so much better than what they gave us before, which was not much," said Jerry Keller, sheriff of the Las Vegas Metropolitan Police Department and president of the Major Cities Chiefs of North America.

Under Ridge's system:

Green is a low risk of terrorist attack.

Blue is a general risk, and officials are asked to review and update **emergency** response procedures.

Yellow is an "elevated condition," meaning there is a significant risk of attack. Increased surveillance of critical locations and implementation of some **emergency** response plans are called for.

Orange signifies a high risk of attack, meaning the government should coordinate security efforts with armed forces or law enforcement agencies and take additional precautions at public events.

Red means a "severe risk" of attack and may require the positioning of specially trained teams, closing of public and government facilities and monitoring of transportation systems.

America is at yellow alert because the al-Qaida terrorist network is trying to re-form after defeats in Afghanistan and has trained thousands of terrorists, some of whom have probably slipped into the United States, Ridge said.

He predicted local leaders would take part in the program.

"Unless we work together so that we have a seamless strategy through the state and down to the local government, I'm afraid we won't be as strong as we need to be to confront what I consider to be a permanent condition that we as a country need to accept as a fact of life," Ridge said.

Hundreds of local police agencies were notified Tuesday of the yellow alert. The color system was put in force immediately for federal agencies.

The system will be subject to a 45-day comment period, after which Ridge plans to turn it into a national framework.

Local officials said they hoped the announcement means more information and federal money is coming their way.

"This is a start in reforming the system, and I'm sure there will be other changes as times go by," said Bill Pasco, executive director of the Fraternal Order of Police.

"With the prior system, everything was equal when I doubt the levels of threat were equal," said Republican Mayor Pat McCrory of Charlotte, N.C.

On Capitol Hill, Oklahoma Gov. Frank Keating, a former FBI agent, recalled that he could not be briefed about one terrorism warning because as governor he did not have the proper security clearance.

"It does no good to tell state officials that something bad might happen and refuse to tell them what, where or when," Keating said.