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THE NATION

Bush Puts FEMA in Charge of Domestic Terrorism Response

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WASHINGTON — President Bush on Tuesday assigned the task of responding to a terrorist attack in the United States to the government agency responsible for mopping up after hurricanes and floods.

"It is clear that the threat of chemical, biological or nuclear weapons being used against the United States--while not immediate--is very real," the president said.

The Federal Emergency Management Agency would create an Office of National Preparedness to coordinate the government's response to such an attack, Bush said.

FEMA's director, Joe Allbaugh, said in a Senate hearing, however, that the expanded role would not reach into the area of preventing attack.

"We are not in the intelligence business," he said.

The mission has been given the name "homeland defense." And with the exception of the nature of the threat itself, its task resembles the work of civil defense units of half a century ago.

"Preparedness is the key to everything, whether you are talking about tornadoes or flooding or terrorism events," Allbaugh said. "I'm an old Boy Scout, and I believe in the motto 'Be Prepared.' And the way we can be prepared is to educate and to train, particularly those who are the first responders--those who put their lives at risk every day."

In a written statement, Bush said that if the government's efforts to reduce the threat from weapons of mass destruction are not successful, "prudence dictates that the United States be fully prepared to deal effectively with the consequences of such a weapon being used on our soil."

He said that numerous federal agencies--46, by Allbaugh's estimate--carry some responsibility for dealing with the consequences of a terrorist attack, and many of them offer help to state and local agencies in terms of planning and training.

The new office's role, within FEMA, will be to coordinate that work. Vice President Dick Cheney was given the task of overseeing the effort.

Allbaugh and several other senior administration officials testified about the plan Tuesday before the Senate Appropriations Committee.

Sen. Pat Roberts (R-Kan.), urging them to push ahead with their plan, said: "There must be better organization at the federal, state and local level. It is critical that we address issues of civil liberties, agency jurisdiction, public education, industry privacy concerns and community medical capabilities."

Secretary of State Colin L. Powell said the State Department was seeking additional funds to counter terrorism.