

Colors to warn of terror risk Today is yellow, midway between green, red

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CHRONICLE SECTIONS

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Washington -- Recalling the tensest days of the Cold War, the Bush administration yesterday announced a five-color warning system to alert Americans to the level of danger posed by terrorists.

Today's condition is yellow, according to Tom Ridge, the president's director of homeland security. Yellow indicates an "elevated risk of terrorist attacks."

Ridge, reflecting a level of anxiety that would have been incomprehensible to most Americans before Sept. 11, said "we are far from being able to predict" the day when terrorists no longer pose a threat.

The five-color system, he said, "provides a common vocabulary so officials from all levels of government can communicate easily with one another and to the public."

The highest level of warning is red, which indicates a "severe risk of terrorist attacks." Red is followed by orange (high risk), yellow, blue (guarded) and green (low risk). Risk levels will be evaluated daily by the attorney general, in consultation with Ridge and based on intelligence from around the world.

"Chances are, we will not be able to lower the condition to green until . . . terror networks of global reach have been defeated and dismantled," Ridge said. "We should not expect a VT Day, a 'Victory of Terrorism Day,' any time soon."

STATE TO STATE CHANGES

The colors could vary from state to state, depending on where the risk was deemed greatest. California officials said the warnings of possible attacks to California's suspension bridges last fall would probably have fallen in the yellow category.

Gov. Gray Davis, who urged Ridge to adopt such a system last December, praised the step as something that will probably be of most use to law enforcement agencies.

"I think this is a practical, common sense approach that will keep the federal government, state government and local law enforcement all on the same page," Davis said.

The federal color code is loosely based on California's three-stage energy alerts, which informed people about the severity of electricity shortages.

However, unlike the California alerts, in which consumers could take action by reducing their electricity use, the colors provide direction only to law enforcement agencies and not to ordinary

Americans.

In fact, administration officials said there may be times when the alert status changes, but the public is not informed in order to protect the integrity of their intelligence-gathering operation.

"If the attorney general determines that notifying law enforcement agencies will help us catch a terrorist and we don't want to let the terrorist know we are coming, then we may hold off on letting the public know," according to documents released yesterday by the Justice Department.

4 PREVIOUS WARNINGS

During four previous terror warnings issued since the Sept. 11 attack, the public has been asked only to remain alert and report suspicious behavior to authorities. Government agencies might be directed to take specific actions. Under a condition red, for example, the Federal Aviation Administration might decide to ground flights or close airports, as it did on Sept. 11.

The mystery surrounding the system and simplicity of assigning colors to something as grave as violent attacks is certain to produce ridicule if not indifference among many Americans. As Ridge was outlining his plan to a group of municipal officials, CNN instead broadcast a report about the San Francisco dog-mauling case being tried in Los Angeles.

But the system was praised by law enforcement officials for bringing a level of uniformity to a new and ever-changing condition.

"We want to be consistent," Davis' security adviser George Vinson said. "This will allow everyone to be on the same page." San Francisco Police Chief Fred Lau said he supports the concept of color-coding the level of terrorist threats but wants to make sure it goes beyond the superficial.

"The color codes would be extremely helpful for us to know that there's at least a level of credibility to the threat," Lau said. "We also would need additional information to verify the credibility of the threat, to know why we've reached that level of alert, and (to be able to) explain it."

The plan reminds some of the red and yellow alerts created during the 1950s to warn of potential nuclear attacks.

"The system will not eliminate risk. No system can," Ridge said. "We face an enemy as ruthless and cunning and as unpredictable as any we've faced."

The color system was immediately put in place for federal agencies, and the government spread word to hundreds of police forces throughout the country of the code yellow. .

The plan may be revised after a 45-day public comment period. Comments can be submitted electronically to HSAScomments@fbi.gov, or mailed to Director, FBI, Homeland Security

Advisory System, Room 7222, 935 Pennsylvania Ave. NW, Washington, DC 20535.

TERROR ALERTS

The Office of Homeland Security color-coded warning system .

GREEN: Low condition: Low risk of attack.

BLUE: Guarded condition: Agency must review emergency response procedures.

YELLOW: Elevated condition: Significant risk. Increased surveillance.

ORANGE: High condition: Additional precaution at public events.

RED: Severe condition: May require positioning specially trained teams, Closing public and government facilities, and monitoring transportation systems. .

Sources: The Office of Homeland Security; Associated Press

Source: <http://www.sfgate.com/chronicle>