

With new terror alert, what do we do now?

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By MICHAEL E. YOUNG and SUZANNE MARTA / The Dallas Morning News

The warning came from Washington wrapped with a sense of urgency, Condition Orange, a high risk of terrorist attack. But the news left many in the Dallas area wondering what exactly they were supposed to do.

Friday's warning, approved by President Bush and dispensed by the new Department of Homeland Security and Attorney General John Ashcroft, came after intelligence sources reported increases in terrorist activity or "chatter." One official said the activity appears to be peaking and rivals levels seen just before the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon.

But federal officials said they'd received no specific threats.

Instead, the mounting chatter, coupled with the possibilities of war with Iraq and the hajj – the annual Muslim pilgrimage to Mecca – triggered the Level Orange alert, officials said.

And they warned that "soft targets" – hotels, apartment complexes and other lightly secured facilities – could be targets.

But other than reviewing security procedures and possibly adding staff, Dallas-area law enforcement agencies and private security teams couldn't offer many specific responses to such general threats.

"What we do is make sure that our report takers recognize [the threat] when people call about suspicious activity," said Officer Carl Duke of the Plano Police Department. "We're more diligent in dealing with those.

"But mostly we rely on educating the public to the threat and relying on them for information."

Routine measures

Area hotels and lodging chains responded with tightened security measures, but those are measures they routinely use.

At Dallas-based Wyndham International Inc., property managers across the chain's more than 200 hotels were asked to review procedures with employees.

Those include checking planters for hidden contraband, keeping outside shrubs shorter than 3 feet and calling the police about suspicious activity.

"As guest and employee safety is of the highest priority, Wyndham International is taking this situation extremely seriously," spokeswoman Darcie Brossart said.

Hyatt Regency at Reunion has kept its staff on heightened alert since the Sept. 11 attacks.

"Hyatt is keeping current with developments and continuously reviewing our security procedures," general manager Steve Vissotzky said. "During these times of heightened concern, our guests and employees can be assured that we are taking appropriate measures to respond to the circumstances."

Paying attention

But the guests should be proactive, too, said John Fannin, chief executive and president of SafePlace Corp., an independent accreditation firm in Wilmington, Del. He recommends that guests take note of the nearest emergency exit, and pay closer attention to what's going on in the area.

Officials worry, though, that as time passes, activity that might have been considered unusual after the Sept. 11 attacks might not generate a response now.

"Historically, when you deal with something for so long, it becomes routine and you write things off," Officer Duke said. "That's just human nature.

"Remember those windshield sunscreens that said 'In Trouble, Call Police' on one side? When they first came out, we used to get lots of calls. We haven't gotten one of those in a long, long time."

That's because people's attention does lapse, especially if nothing terrible happens, said Dr. Mahhukar Trivedi, an associate professor at the University of Texas Southwestern Medical Center at Dallas, and head of the school's depression and anxiety program.

"But two other things also happen simultaneously," Dr. Trivedi said. "One is the passage of time. The longer the time since Sept. 11, the more it becomes clear that people don't jump to this news as they would have on Sept. 12.

"And the other is people wonder what they need to do. Even if they are anxious about it, they still don't know what they should do."

Still, the trauma of Sept. 11 was so profound that it remains fresh in people's minds, and they are anxious about continued threats, Dr. Trivedi said.

At the 620-unit Camden Farmers Market apartment complex in Dallas, community manager Cindy Rudeloff hadn't heard about the Level Orange alert, but said her tenants would want to know what steps were being taken.

"If they've issued an alert, I know I'll get a ton of phone calls from residents," she said. "I'll type up a letter, letting them know we're aware of the situation, what our evacuation procedures are, things like that.

"But once they read this in the paper, I'll still get a ton of phone calls."

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Ways to be prepared

Some tips from the Federal Emergency Management Agency on ways to be prepared for a terrorist attack or natural disaster:

- Arrange a way for family members to contact each other, such as through an out-of-town relative.
- Identify two family meeting places, one near home and the second away from the neighborhood in case home cannot be approached.
- Find out the emergency response and evacuation plans of employers, school, day care and other officials.
- Keep life, property, health and other insurance policies current, and know their terms. Store copies of these and other important documents, along with a small amount of cash, in a watertight container.
- Have a plan for pets, since shelters do not allow them.
- Assemble a "disaster supply kit" and keep it in a designated place. It should include bottled water, food and emergency supplies.
- With guidance from your doctor or pharmacist, store prescription drugs and an extra set of prescription glasses.
- Have a first aid kit.

SOURCE: Associated Press