

3 Reportedly Saw Suspect at Bomb Scene

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Three witnesses placed prime suspect Timothy McVeigh in front of the federal building here moments before a deadly explosion, a source told The Associated Press.

New details of McVeigh's activities in the days before the Oklahoma bombing surfaced yesterday, including a chilling warning to a friend that ``Something big is going to happen."

In Washington, President Clinton proposed adding 1,000 federal workers to the fight against terrorism and endorsed stiffer penalties for attacks on government employees.

And in Kingman, a federal law enforcement official said nitrates, a component believed used in last week's Oklahoma City bombing, were detected in samples taken from the site of a February explosion just blocks from where McVeigh once lived in the Arizona community.

``The theory is that this may have been a test, but we need to do more work," said the Washington official, who spoke to The Associated Press on condition of anonymity.

Investigators were trying to trace McVeigh's movements after the explosion that gutted the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building, a source told The Associated Press. One theory was that McVeigh dropped off a still-missing colleague before he was arrested for traffic and weapons violations.

Witnesses apparently saw McVeigh in front of the building before the truck carrying the bomb arrived, the source said.

Revelations of McVeigh's actions in the days before the bombing came in a Wichita, Kan., courtroom as prosecutors sought to take the friend, Terry Nichols, to Oklahoma. The judge granted their request but delayed it until May 5 so Nichols could appeal.

U.S. District Judge Monti Belot seemed skeptical that 33 guns, a 60mm anti-tank rocket and blasting devices confiscated from Nichols' home could be explained by his status as a military surplus dealer.

``I don't believe most of the citizens of the United States have anti-tank weapons," he said. ``I don't know that U.S. citizens have that many guns or pamphlets about Waco or literature about government warfare."

He said those items buttressed the government's request that Nichols be moved to Oklahoma City.

``There is substantial evidence that Mr. Nichols is an associate with Mr. McVeigh in the extent of connections with the Oklahoma bombing," Belot said. As the investigation advanced, the city and the nation paused to observe a moment of silence at 9:02 a.m. - the precise moment of the blast one week ago. Bells rang, tears flowed and heads bowed as searchers stood amid the ruins of the collapsed federal building.

The death toll stood at 98.

In court, U.S. Attorney Randy Rathbun said neighbors of Nichols in Herington, Kan., about 270 miles north of Oklahoma City, reported that Nichols spent April 12-14 with McVeigh and several unidentified men. One of the men resembled sketches of John Doe 2, who is the subject of a nationwide search, Rathbun said.

According to Rathbun, McVeigh called Nichols from Oklahoma City on April 16 and asked him to pick him up.

Rathbun, quoting what Nichols told the FBI after he was taken in, gave this account of what happened next:

Nichols picked up McVeigh, and as the two men drove north, McVeigh told Nichols: ``Something big is going to happen." Nichols responded: ``Are you going to rob a bank?" and McVeigh repeated, ``Something big is going to happen."

The men reached Junction City, Kan., early in the morning of April 17. The FBI says the Ryder truck used in the bombing was rented in Junction City later that day.

The next day, McVeigh borrowed Nichols' pickup truck and told him, ``If I don't come back in a while, go clean up the storage shed." He returned the truck later that day.

Both McVeigh and Nichols had access to a shed outside Herington that was rented under an alias, Rathbun said. Sources have said tire tracks matching the type of truck used in the bombing were found at the shed.

The bomb exploded the next morning in Oklahoma City.

Minutes before the blast, and apparently before the arrival of the truck carrying the 4,800-pound bomb, three witnesses saw McVeigh in front of the federal building, a law enforcement official in Washington told the AP on the condition of anonymity.

The truck was in front of the building ``less than 10 or 15 minutes. There was probably a very short-fused timing device on it," the official said.

The official also said McVeigh's 1977 yellow Mercury Marquis contained a hand-written notice suggesting car trouble, perhaps part of a plot to guarantee his car wouldn't be towed and he could make a quick getaway.

Investigators have been dispatched along Interstate 35 from Oklahoma City to Perry - a 60-mile stretch - to interview restaurant, gas station and other proprietors as well as residents to see if anyone saw McVeigh, the still-missing suspect dubbed ``John Doe 2," or others, the official said.

McVeigh was stopped by a state trooper for a traffic violation near Perry 75 minutes after the bombing. He was arrested on a weapons charge and sat in the county jail for two days before authorities realized the bombing suspect was under their noses.

A crumpled business card, apparently left by McVeigh, was found in the police vehicle that took him to the station in Perry. ``It had a note on it to pick up more explosives, like a reminder note," a federal law enforcement official said, demanding anonymity.

The source also said McVeigh has refused to talk. ``He's very stoic and has classified himself as a prisoner of war," the official said.

Clinton proposed additional initiatives just hours after attending the funeral of a Secret Service agent killed in the bombing.

Clinton said the measures were ``grounded in common sense and steeled with force."

Flanked by Sen. Bob Dole and Rep. Newt Gingrich, the leaders of the GOP-controlled Congress, the president said he was hopeful his proposals would find bipartisan support.

The newest proposals from Clinton would expand law enforcement officials' powers to investigate and prosecute, as well as increase penalties for those who attack federal employees or provide firearms or explosives used in violent crimes or drug trafficking.

He would add 1,000 new agents, prosecutors and support personnel to fight terrorism.

Clinton proposed greatly increasing the ability of federal officers to conduct court-approved electronic surveillance and to make it easier for them to detect explosive materials. He also would allow the military to get involved in criminal cases involving weapons of mass destruction, at the request of local officials.

The president stopped short of calling for expanded FBI authority to infiltrate domestic groups suspected of terrorism, one proposal that has drawn considerable concern from civil liberties groups.

Caption:

Photo by The Associated Press

Tired firefighter Skip Fernandez of Miami, Fla., rests with his search dog, Aspen, after completing a 12-hour shift yesterday looking for survivors and bodies in the bombing.