

FBI boss in hot seat over missing McVeigh papers

by William Walker
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WASHINGTON - The FBI is bringing in a "world-class" expert on record keeping to ensure all documents related to Timothy McVeigh and the Oklahoma City bombing case are brought forward.

Outgoing FBI Director Louis Freeh announced he was halting all investigative case work for a single day to implement a sweeping new record keeping system that will include annual retraining of all FBI agents.

Freeh was in the hot seat as he testified before members of Congress about the huge embarrassment of failing to disclose investigative records in the McVeigh case.

"The buck does stop with me," Freeh told the hearing yesterday - the day McVeigh would have been executed if not for the FBI mistake.

He admitted the FBI's handling of the McVeigh records was simply "unacceptable" and would result in major changes at the agency.

"I have instructed that every employee in the FBI immediately receive a block of instruction on every aspect of our existing records policies," Freeh said.

"These policies are good when followed, but they were not followed here."

It was a contrite Freeh who testified before the House appropriations subcommittee.

He was supposed to discuss the FBI budget, but the session focused on the McVeigh blunder.

Reaction from committee members ranged from judging the FBI's performance as "pitiful" to dismissing the incident as irrelevant to the outcome of McVeigh's case.

But the majority agreed with senior Democrat David Obey of Wisconsin who said the FBI has "a litany of troubles."

Senators Charles Schumer, a New York Democrat, and Republican Charles Grassley of Iowa have written to President George W. Bush asking for a "blue ribbon commission" to investigate the FBI's mishandling of the McVeigh case.

Freeh said the FBI was so focused on high-tech crimes and terrorism that a "basic" function such as record keeping was "taken for granted."

McVeigh - convicted of the 1995 bombing of the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City, which killed 168 people and injured more than 500 others - huddled with his lawyers yesterday at the Terre Haute, Ind., federal prison where he is being held on death row.

His lawyers said he was in "good spirits" on what was his original execution date, and was still keeping all his legal options open.

Lawyer Nathan Chambers said McVeigh is taking an "active role" in deciding what to do about the more than 3,000 FBI documents that should have been given to his defence team. He's weighing whether they provide an opportunity to challenge his conviction and death sentence.

"It's certainly not an exercise in futility," lawyer Robert Nigh told reporters.

Another 700 documents have subsequently been discovered. Freeh said yesterday that bringing in an outside records auditor will be the only way to get to the bottom of it, making a possible delay in the new June 11 execution even more likely.

Freeh said he hopes the missing McVeigh records will eventually be made public so Americans can judge for themselves the FBI's contention that they will not affect the outcome of McVeigh's case.

Freeh said mismanagement of FBI records is a "recurring problem" caused not by a faulty computer system but by bad management and faulty "human behaviour."

"We simply have too little management attention focused on what has become, over time, a monumental task" of managing 12 billion paper and automated records, he said.

Meanwhile, buildings near the Oklahoma City National Memorial were evacuated yesterday morning while police examined a suspicious pickup truck with a bumper sticker mentioning the government raid at Waco.

The driver, Amo Roden, 58, was questioned for about two hours before being released.

She said she was a Branch Davidian member but didn't realize yesterday was the day bomber McVeigh had been scheduled to be executed.

Roden, who believes the government bombed the federal building, said she was weeping near a chain-link fence covered with mementoes of the 168 people who died when police began questioning her about her vehicle.

The gray pickup had a sticker that said ``Waco, Texas, and Oklahoma City are where the one world government shot itself in the foot."

The vehicle was searched for explosives, but none were found.

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