

US Spy Chief Slams Leaks on Surveillance Program

By: William Gallo- June 7, 2013

The top U.S. spy chief has slammed the leak of top-secret documents that have shed light on how the government collects information on people's telephone records and Internet use.

In a statement late Thursday, James Clapper, the Director of National Intelligence, defended the programs as crucial to U.S. anti-terror activities, and warned their exposure threatens national security.

"The unauthorized disclosure of a top-secret U.S. court document threatens potentially long-lasting and irreversible harm to our ability to identify and respond to the many threats facing our nation," said Clapper.

Clapper was referring to a report in The Guardian, which published a secret court order demanding communications company Verizon to hand over to the National Security Agency millions of phone records of Americans on an "ongoing, daily basis."

Later, The Guardian, along with The Washington Post, reported on a separate classified program that allegedly provides the National Security Agency (NSA) and Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) with direct access to the servers of nine major U.S. Internet companies, including Google, Facebook, YouTube and Apple.

Several of the companies later released statements saying they have not given the government direct access to their servers.

Reports 'contain numerous inaccuracies'

Clapper's statement said the media reports "contain numerous inaccuracies." Though he did not provide specifics to back up that claim, he did offer new information on the programs, he says, in order to correct the "misleading impression" of the articles, which Clapper said omit "key information."

"The program does not allow the Government to listen in on anyone's phone calls," said Clapper, referring to the phone surveillance initiative. "The information acquired does not include the content of any communications or the identity of any subscriber. The only type of information acquired under the Court's order is telephony metadata, such as telephone numbers dialed and length of calls."

He also insisted the Internet monitoring program, allegedly code-named "PRISM," cannot be used to intentionally target U.S. citizens or those living in the United States. He said it involves

extensive procedures to ensure that information collected "incidentally" on U.S. persons is protected.

"Information collected under this program is among the most important and valuable foreign intelligence information we collect, and is used to protect our nation from a wide variety of threats," said Clapper.

Government overreacting to terrorism?

The programs have drawn severe criticism from some lawmakers and civil liberty groups that object to the government's broad surveillance powers granted by Congress after the September 11, 2001 attacks.

"This program is part of an overreaction to terrorism. It won't actually effectively find terrorism, but ultimately we will see uses that are quite detrimental to our fourth amendment rights and our privacy, the privacy of all of us -- all law-abiding American citizens," said Jim Harper, the Cato Institute's information policy studies director.

In a statement, American Civil Liberties Union deputy legal director Jameel Jaffer said "the program could hardly be more alarming." He said "innocent people" had been put under constant government surveillance.

Could prompt debate in Congress

"When law-abiding Americans make phone calls, who they call, when they call and where they call from is private information," said Ron Wyden, a Democratic Senator from the western state of Oregon, "As a result of the disclosures that came to light today, we're going to have a real debate in the Congress and the country that's long overdue."

Officials say the surveillance powers fall under the Patriot Act, which was signed into law by former President George W. Bush in 2001. President Barack Obama has extended key provisions of the act, as has Congress.

Brennan Center for Justice program co-director Elizabeth Goitein told said the government's interpretation of the law is shocking.

"It is stunning, but I should say that it is not surprising because we have known for years that the government has a secret interpretation of the so-called business record provision of the Patriot Act. And, we have known this because senators who have access to classified information on the intelligence committees have been saying this," she said.

The Obama administration had already been under fire recently after it was revealed that the U.S. Justice Department secretly obtained phone records from the Associated Press news agency in connection with a leak investigation.

Administration officials have hinted that there will also be an investigation into the most recent leaks.