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FBI Alerts Allies on Al Qaeda's Nuclear Plans

MANILA (Reuters) - The United States has alerted its allies to watch out for attempts by Osama bin Laden's al Qaeda network to produce weapons of mass destruction, FBI chief Robert Mueller said Monday.

Mueller, in Manila, raised the concern in talks with Philippine officials before flying back to the United States at the end of a tour of Southeast Asia.

He has said the region is a potential sanctuary for members of al Qaeda, prime suspects in the September 11 attacks on New York and Washington.

Mueller said evidence gathered in Afghanistan showed without doubt that the Saudi-born bin Laden and al Qaeda were trying to obtain biological, chemical and nuclear weapons.

``We have not seen any definitive evidence that he was successful but there is enough there to cause us substantial concern and ... to say to countries around the world to be on the alert for any efforts or attempts by terrorist groups to obtain weapons of mass destruction," Mueller told a news conference.

He said it was clear al Qaeda had established a presence in Southeast Asia and that the United States and its allies in the region were on the alert against possible new attacks by the group.

Mueller singled out the militant Jemaah Islamiah group as linked to bin Laden's network and said it also had ties in several countries, including Singapore, Malaysia and Indonesia.

``We are working together to put all the pieces in the puzzle ... so that we can have a fuller portrait of al Qaeda's presence in the region."

Security forces in Singapore, Malaysia and the Philippines have detained dozens of Islamic militants in recent weeks on suspicion they might be linked to JI.

U.S. special forces are currently training Filipino troops in counter-terrorism to help defeat the Abu Sayyaf group in the southern Philippines, which Washington has also linked to al Qaeda.

The Abu Sayyaf has been holding a U.S. missionary couple hostage for nearly 10 months on southern Basilan island.

Mueller warned in Singapore last week that al Qaeda members fleeing from Afghanistan might seek new sanctuaries in other areas, including Southeast Asia and the Middle East.

Mueller voiced the same concern in talks with Philippine President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo before he left Manila.

``He emphasized that there is no evidence of any al Qaeda cell in the Philippines but we have to take all the necessary precautions to make sure that this continues this way," presidential national security adviser Roilo Golez said.

Golez said Mueller offered the FBI's technical assistance in tracking down funds of terror groups as well as information obtained from members of al Qaeda and the Taliban regime captured in the Afghanistan conflict.

Philippine police have detained at least four Indonesians in recent weeks for questioning on their possible links to al Qaeda.

``What has emerged from our investigation is that the Indonesians, while they may have no direct link to al Qaeda, appear to have a connection with Jemaah Islamiah," national police chief Leandro Mendoza said.

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