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ATTN: NASCIO Security listserv members

STATEMENT BY HOMELAND SECURITY SECRETARY TOM RIDGE

The Department of Homeland Security in consultation with the Homeland Security Council, has made the decision to raise the national threat level from an Elevated to High risk of terrorist attack or Level Orange.

The Intelligence Community believes that terrorists will attempt multiple attacks against U.S. and Coalition targets worldwide in the event of a U.S. led military campaign against Saddam Hussein. A large volume of reporting across a range of sources, some of which are highly reliable, indicates that Al-Qaida probably would attempt to launch terrorist attacks against U.S. interests claiming they were defending Muslims or the Iraqi people rather than Saddam Husseins regime.

While the March 1 arrest of senior Al Qaida operative, Khalid Shaykh Muhammad (KSM) has put the Al-Qaida senior leadership on the defensive and will be debilitating in the long term -- the Intelligence Community believes that KSMs capture will not necessarily affect operations that are ready or nearly ready for execution. There are many recent indications that Al-Qaidas planning includes the use of chemical, biological, and/or radiological materials.

Intelligence reporting also indicates that while Al-Qaida and those sympathetic to their cause are a principal threat, Iraqi state agents, Iraqi surrogate groups, other regional extremist organizations, and ad hoc groups or disgruntled individuals not connected to existing organizations or state agencies, may use this time period to conduct terrorist attacks against the U.S., or our interests abroad.

In recent months, there have been reports of suspicious activity in and around military facilities, ports, waterways, general infrastructure (bridges, dams, power generating facilities), and targets that are considered symbolic to U.S. power and influence. The discovery of ricin production in London raises the concern of the Intelligence Community that extremists are planning to follow through on longstanding threats of poison plots against U.S, British and Israeli interests and possibly other targets in Europe.

The Department of Homeland Security, in conjunction with numerous departments of the federal government has begun implementing increased protective measures under a comprehensive national plan to protect the Homeland: Operation Liberty Shield.

Operation Liberty Shield will increase security at our borders, strengthen transportation sector protections, enhance security at our critical infrastructure, increase public health preparedness and make sure all federal response assets can be deployed quickly. Tonight, I have spoken to the nations Governors and asked them to deploy the National Guard or additional police forces to improve security at critical locations throughout their states. Other state, local and private sector leaders are also being contacted to engage their support to increase the nations security.

These heightened security measures will help deter terrorism and increase protection of America and Americans. In the meantime, as on the other occasions when the national threat level has been increased, we encourage members of the public to continue their daily work, family and leisure activities with a heightened awareness.