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NSA chief says surveillance programs helped foil 54 plots

By Courtney Kube, Producer, NBC News

As of last Friday, the U.S. government disrupted 54 terrorist activities using information collected under the controversial "Section 702 of the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act" and "Section 215 of the Patriot Act," the director of the National Security Agency said Thursday.

Gen. Keith Alexander said these programs enabled the United States to disrupt 54 "events," 42 of which "involved disrupted plots."

Of those 54:

- 12 involved cases of material support to terrorists;
- 50 lead to arrests or detentions;
- 25 occurred in Europe;
- 11 were in Asia;
- 5 were in Africa;
- 13 had a homeland nexus.

Forty-one of the terrorist activities did not involve events in the United States, Alexander said.

Alexander went on to say that in 53 of the 54 cases, data collected under Section 702 provided the initial tip to "unravel the threat stream." He said that almost half of terrorist reporting comes from Section 702, and added that of those 54 terrorist activities disrupted, there was not a single case where the government willfully violated the law.

Earlier this month, the revelation of two ultra-secret government surveillance programs raised outrage among many Americans. The man at the center of the leaks, former NSA-contractor Edward

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Snowden, is still on the lam — reportedly in Russia — with U.S. authorities calling for his return to face espionage charges.

Among other things, Section 215 of the [Patriot Act](#) greatly expands the government's ability to spy on people living in the United States and allows the FBI to order any person or organization to turn over "any tangible things ... for an authorized investigation ... to protect against international terrorism or clandestine intelligence activities."

Meanwhile, Section 702 is a provision of FISA that was "designed to facilitate the acquisition of foreign intelligence information concerning non-U.S. persons located outside the United States," according to a statement from the Director of National Intelligence James Clapper [earlier this month](#).

Speaking at the non-profit AFCEA International Cyber Symposium in Baltimore on Thursday, Alexander recounted how these programs were born shortly after the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks, when the intelligence community "could not connect the dots."

He said the government can only go into the "virtual lock box" of metadata on a "selector" — or target — if there is reasonable suspicion that the individual or group is related to terrorism.

He added that, in 2012, fewer than 300 selectors' lock boxes were approved for query. The numbers show, however, that there was no where near 300 disrupted terrorist activities.

Alexander joined the chorus of national security leaders to condemn the recent leaks, saying that public discussion of NSA techniques and tools provides insights that terrorists "can and do use to hide their activities."

He said that those who wish the U.S. harm now know how we counter their actions.

"These leaks have caused significant and irreversible damage to our nation's security," he said, adding that whenever tools are revealed, "we lose our ability to track these targets."

"What is going on in these leaks is unconscionable in my opinion," he said, adding that it hurts the United States and its allies. "It is flat wrong."

"I worry that there will be more leaks," and people will attempt to further sensationalize this issue, Alexander said.

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