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MailOnline

We're spying on fewer than 60 Americans around the world, says NSA chief as he grants unprecedented behind-the-scenes tour of its HQ to '60 Minutes'

- Gen Keith Alexander says NSA does not routinely eavesdrop on US citizens
- Says agency will only listen to phone calls if they have obtained court order
- He does not believe that Snowden should be granted amnesty for documents
- But second-in-command says it's a move 'worth having conversation about'
- Rick Ledgett said Snowden had effectively 'stolen the keys to the kingdom'

By [Simon Tomlinson](#)

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The boss of the NSA has denied claims the agency routinely eavesdrops on the phone calls of Americans, insisting that fewer than 60 'U.S. persons' were currently being targeted worldwide.

General Keith Alexander said the agency only targets the communications of nationals 'with a probable cause' after obtaining a court order.

He was speaking to CBS television's 60 Minutes after granting the station unprecedented access to its secretive HQ in a belated damage-limitation exercise in the wake of Edward Snowden's leaks.



On the defence: NSA chief General Keith Alexander tells CBS's 60 Minutes that the agency is only spying on fewer than '60 U.S. persons' as he denies claims it routinely listened into phone calls



Preserving their reputation: 60 Minutes was granted unprecedented access to its secretive HQ in a belated damage-limitation exercise in the wake of Edward Snowden's leaks

'NSA can only target the communications of a US person with a probable cause finding under specific court order,' he said, referring to the secret Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Court.

'Today, we have less than 60 authorisations on specific persons to do that.'

Alexander challenged the view that the NSA was engaged in listening to the content of phone calls, but acknowledged that basic information of more than 300million phone records were collected.

He said: 'There's no reason that we would listen to the phone calls of Americans. There's no intelligence value in that.

'There's no reason that we'd want to read their email. There is no intelligence value in that.'

Alexander's second-in command, Rick Ledgett, later told the program that Snowden had effectively stolen the 'keys to the kingdom' when he swiped more than 1.5 million top secret files.



Damaging: Another NSA chief, Rick Ledgett (pictured), told the program that Snowden had effectively stolen the 'keys to the kingdom' when he swiped more than 1.5 million top secret files



Worried: Ledgett said of particular concern was Snowden's theft of around 31,000 documents the NSA official described as an 'exhaustive list of the requirements that have been levied against the NSA'

Ledgett, who heads the NSA taskforce in charge of assessing the impact of Snowden's leaks, said the contractor possessed a 'roadmap' of the US intelligence community's strengths and weaknesses.

He said of particular concern was Snowden's theft of around 31,000 documents the NSA official described as an 'exhaustive list of the requirements that have been levied against the National Security Agency.'

'What that gives is, what topics we're interested in, where our gaps are,' said Ledgett. 'Additional information about US capabilities and US gaps is provided as part of that.'

The information could potentially offer a rival nation a 'roadmap of what we know, what we don't know, and give them - implicitly - a way to protect their information from the US intelligence community's view,' the NSA official added.

'It is the keys to the kingdom.'



Secretive operations: The NSA has made dozens of changes in its operations and computer networks to prevent the emergence of another Snowden

Ledgett said he would be open to the possibility of an amnesty for Snowden, who remains exiled in Russia, if he agreed to stop further leaks of classified information.

'My personal view is, yes, it's worth having a conversation about' a possible deal, said Ledgett.

Snowden has been charged with espionage by US authorities for divulging reams of secret files.

The former NSA contractor has insisted he spilled secrets to spark public debate and expose the NSA's far-reaching surveillance.

But Alexander rejected the idea of any amnesty for Snowden.

'This is analogous to a hostage-taker taking 50 people hostage, shooting 10 and then say 'You give me full amnesty and I'll let the other 40 go,' Alexander told 60 Minutes.

In all, Ledgett says Snowden is likely to still be in possession of more than 1.5 million classified documents as he waits in asylum in Russia.



Top secret: A room known as the black chamber where the NSA's codebreakers operate

Meanwhile, the NSA has made dozens of changes in its operations and computer networks to prevent the emergence of another Snowden, including potential disciplinary action, a top NSA official said on Friday, as a White House review panel recommended restraints on NSA spying.

In the more than hour-long interview with Reuters, Ledgett acknowledged the agency had done a poor job in its initial public response to revelations of vast NSA monitoring of phone and Internet data; pledged more transparency; and said he was deeply worried about highly classified documents not yet public that are among the 1.7 million Snowden is believed to have accessed.

He also stoutly defended the NSA's mission of tracking terrorist plots and other threats, and said its recruiting of young codebreakers, linguists and computer geeks has not been affected by the Snowden affair - even as internal morale has been.

'Any time you trust people, there is always a chance that someone will betray you,' he said.

The NSA is taking 41 specific technical measures to control data by tagging and tracking it, to supervise agency networks with controls on activity, and to increase oversight of individuals.



The NSA's HQ in Fort Meade, Maryland: Ledgett said Snowden's documents could potentially give rival nations a 'roadmap' showing them how to protect their information from the US intelligence community's view

Measures include requiring two-person control of every place where someone could access data and enhancing the security process that people go through and requiring more frequent screenings of systems administrative access, Ledgett said.

After months of sometimes blistering criticism in the news media and by Congress and foreign governments, the publicity-averse NSA is now mounting an effort to tell its side of the Snowden story.

Ledgett, a 36-year intelligence veteran who reportedly is in line to be the agency's deputy director, joked that doing media interviews was 'a complete out-of-body experience for me.'

He spoke to Reuters on the same day that the White House said it had decided to maintain the practice of having a single individual head both the NSA and U.S. Cyber Command, which conducts cyberwarfare - an outcome the NSA leadership favored.

Separately, news reports late Thursday said an outside review panel appointed by the White House has recommended changes in a program disclosed by Snowden that collects basic data on Americans' phone calls - known as metadata.



Bargaining Chip: Authorities say Snowden still has 1.5 million classified documents in his possession

The panel reportedly said the data should be held by an organization other than the NSA and stricter rules should be enforced for searching the databanks.

Ledgett declined to discuss the panel's specific recommendations. But he seemed to acknowledge that tighter guidelines for NSA eavesdropping were in the offing, saying that what is technologically possible 'has gotten ahead of policy.'

Snowden, who is living under asylum in Russia, disclosed a vast U.S. eavesdropping apparatus that includes the phone metadata program; NSA querying of Internet communications via major companies such as Google Inc and Facebook Inc; and widespread tapping of international communication networks.

Ledgett made no apologies for what many see as overly aggressive NSA monitoring.

He noted that the U.S. government's intelligence taskings to the agency run to 36,000 pages, and said its activities take place within a 'box' of U.S. laws and policies.

'We'll color in every square millimeter of that box,' he said, implying the NSA will use its legal authorities to the fullest extent possible.

The NSA's internal review has determined about 98 percent of the scope of the material that Snowden had accessed, and officials have found no evidence that he had help either within the NSA or from adversary spy agencies.

Ledgett said that when Snowden was downloading the documents, NSA was ahead of other intelligence agencies in installing 'insider threat' software that President Barack Obama ordered in the wake of an earlier leak scandal involving the group WikiLeaks.

But installation of the software, which might have stopped Snowden, was not complete.

'Snowden hit at a really opportune time. For him - not for us,' he said.

Ledgett said that most of the Snowden material released publicly so far has been about NSA programs and partnerships with foreign countries and companies, rather than intelligence reports and 'requirements.' The latter refers to U.S. government taskings to the NSA to answer questions about specific targets.

That last category is what keeps him up at night. 'Those make me nervous because they reveal what we know and what we don't know and they are almost a roadmap for adversaries.'

No one at the NSA has yet lost their job over the Snowden crisis, including at the Hawaii site where he worked.

Ledgett said three people are under review for potential disciplinary action, but declined further comment.

Find this story at www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2524553/NSA-chief-grants-unprecedented-scenes-tour-HQ-60-Minutes.html

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