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## Holder: Intelligence-sharing centers vital

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By Cain Burdeau, Associated Press Writer

NEW ORLEANS — U.S. Attorney General Eric Holder said Tuesday that the burgeoning network of intelligence-sharing centers across the nation plays a vital role in the war against terrorism and fighting crime, but added that its operations must not trample on Americans' civil liberties.

Holder said the Justice Department would continue investing in the network of 72 centers, known as fusion centers. Run by state and local governments, the centers sprouted up in state police operations and police departments after the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks. The centers analyze information and mine data from multiple government and private sources.

"Our fusion centers are on the front lines of America's best and most effective efforts to fight back" against terrorists and criminals, Holder said at the National Fusion Center Conference in New Orleans.

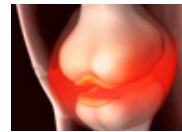
Between 2004 and 2008, the Department of Homeland Security spent about \$350 million on the fusion centers, according to DHS officials. They did not have more recent figures on spending.

The attorney general said the fusion centers represented a "flexible, pragmatic and aggressive" approach to fighting terrorists rather than a "narrow, ideological approach." He said greater communication and collaboration between agencies has prevented "hundreds of crimes."

Holder cited the case of Najibullah Zazi as an example of the importance of sharing information. Zazi pleaded guilty Monday to attempting to make bombs for an attack on New York City subways.

The Colorado Information Analysis Center, a Colorado fusion center, received information in the case and helped the FBI and DHS arrest Zazi, according to material provided by the National Fusion Center Conference.

"This attempted attack on our homeland was real, it was in motion, and -- were it not for the combined efforts of our law enforcement and intelligence communities -- it would have been deadly," Holder said.



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Besides fighting terrorism, Holder said the fusion centers "can and must tackle every type of threat and all forms of crimes."

But the growth of the intelligence-sharing network, spreading into all aspects of crime-fighting, has sparked privacy concerns.

"There is already substantial evidence of abuse," said Michael German, policy counsel at the American Civil Liberties Union in Washington. The ACLU has criticized fusion centers as a secretive "domestic intelligence network" tracking innocent citizens. German said he was concerned that fusion centers have been operating without adequate oversight.

On Tuesday, Holder said that under his watch the centers would not "jeopardize every American's guaranteed right to privacy."

"The protection of our civil liberties is of critical importance -- to me, to the Justice Department, and to this administration," he said.

Starting this year, the Justice Department will require fusion centers receiving federal funds to certify that privacy and civil rights protections are followed, said Lt. Tom Monahan, the president of the National Fusion Center Association and director of the Southern Nevada Counter-Terrorism Center in Las Vegas, Nev.

"Without question, the protection of privacy and civil liberties and civil rights is paramount," Monahan said. "What we're not trying to establish is a domestic spying enterprise. That is not the case at all."

Torin Monahan, a professor at Vanderbilt University who has written about government surveillance programs, said the network of fusion centers was limited for the time being, due to funding and staffing restraints. "It's not a Big Brother scenario," he said, "but there are potentials for abuse."

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