

CIA releases declassified documents from 9/11 file

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WASHINGTON — Budgetary woes in the CIA unit that tracked Osama bin Laden prior to the deadly 2001 strikes led analysts to believe that catching the al-Qaida leader was unlikely, according to government records published Tuesday.

Many of the newly released documents are cited in the 9/11 Commission report, published in 2004. The documents, dated between 1992 and 2004 are heavily blacked out and offer little new information about what the U.S. knew about the al-Qaida plot before 2001.

The National Security Archive obtained the documents through a Freedom of Information Act request and published them on its website Tuesday. The archive is a private group seeking transparency in government.

The CIA had no immediate comment.

The newly released documents detail CIA complaints that a budgetary cash crunch prior to the 9/11 attacks was cutting into the agency's counterterrorism units' efforts to track Osama bin Laden.

"Need forward movement on supplemental soonest," said a heavily blacked out document titled "Islamic Extremist Update" dated April 5, 2000.

The supplemental budget was still under review by the national security council and White House Office of Management and Budget. The document said that because of budgetary constraints, the bin Laden unit would move from an "offensive to defensive posture." This meant that officials feared they would have to shelve some of their

more elaborate proposals to track al-Qaida and would instead have to rely on existing resources.

The document hints at complaints made by previous directors of the bin Laden unit and detailed publicly after the attacks that the Bush and Clinton administrations did not fully appreciate the severity of the threat, so failed to fund fully their operations.

One of the previously unreleased documents involves 9/11 hijacker Mohammed Atta, an Egyptian national who piloted American Airlines Flight 11 into the World Trade Center's north tower. According to a Dec. 8, 2001, CIA report that was sent to the White House Situation Room, the spy agency had already made a preliminary determination that Atta had not in fact traveled to Prague in the Czech Republic in May 2000 to rendezvous with a senior official of the Iraqi Intelligence Service.

That he would have met with the IIS was significant for intelligence officials looking for a connection between al-Qaida and Iraq.

But one day after the report was sent to the White House, Vice President Dick Cheney claimed on NBC's "Meet the Press" that it had been "pretty confirmed" that Atta had gone to Prague several months before the attack.

According to the 9/11 Commission report, it turned out to be a case of mistaken identity after a similarly named Pakistani tried to get into the Czech Republic but was turned away.

The document was the basis for a footnote in chapter seven of the 9/11 report.

Even though the information about Atta meeting with the ISS was later disproved, it still resonated with those bent on going to war with Iraq.