

Key phase in panel's study of Sept. 11

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A lack of cooperation from the U.S. administration could hamper an independent inquiry into the Sept. 11 terror attacks, the commission's leaders say.

"The task in front of us is monumental, and time is slipping by," said Thomas H. Kean, the commission's chairman. "Every day lost complicates our work."



Mr. Kean and the panel's vice chairman, Lee Hamilton, gave a blunt status report Tuesday after arriving in Washington for the commission's third public hearing, to be held Wednesday on Capitol Hill. The hearing focuses on terrorism, al-Qaeda and the Muslim world.

Mr. Kean, a Republican former governor of New Jersey, and Mr. Hamilton, a Democratic former congressman from Indiana, singled out government departments including Defense and Justice that they said were not cooperating fully with the 10-member National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States.

They said they took the unusual step because the administration's level of cooperation during the next few weeks will determine whether the panel can write a thorough report by its May 2004 deadline.

Mr. Kean said Mr. Bush and his aides have tried to help, but "it is also clear that the administration underestimated the scale of the commission's work." The commission has requested 26 briefings and made 44 requests for documents, which cover millions of pages, from 16 government agencies.

In their interim report, Mr. Kean and Mr. Hamilton said the degree of

cooperation has varied by office and agency:

-The commission is receiving access to "a wide range of sensitive documents" from Bush's office and from the National Security Council, but "conditions have been imposed, in some cases, with respect to our access to and usage of materials."

-The CIA assembled a team of analysts to review events leading up to Sept. 11, 2001, and their work has been invaluable. But the CIA has not responded as quickly to the commission's requests for internal documents on management and resources.

-Records requested from the Justice Department are overdue, and the department has yet to resolve how to help the commission review the case of Sept. 11 conspiracy suspect Zacarias Moussaoui, who is awaiting trial.

-Problems with the Defense Department "are becoming particularly serious." The commission has received no responses to requests related to national air defenses among other topics.

-Within the Homeland Security Department , elements of the former Immigration and Naturalization Service "have been slow in providing briefings, although there are recent signs of improvement."

The FBI, State Department and Transportation Department received generally positive reviews.

Mr. Kean said he has been particularly troubled by the U.S. President George W. Bush's administration's insistence on having a Justice Department official present when commission representatives interview federal officials.

"The commission feels unanimous that it's some intimidation to have somebody sitting behind you all the time who works for your agency," he said.

Mark Corallo, a Justice Department spokesman, said having a department representative present at interviews is standard procedure and designed to help, not intimidate, the person being questioned.

White House spokeswoman Claire Buchan said Mr. Bush is committed to helping the commission. "We have already provided thousands of pages of documents, as well as numerous individuals for interviews, and we intend to continue to do so," she said.



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