

GAO says Ridge withholding data needed for budget By Michael Kilian
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WASHINGTON -- The U.S. comptroller general slammed the White House Office of Homeland Security on Thursday for failing to turn over information vital to congressional budget decisions on the U.S. anti-terrorism effort.

"There remains a certain core of information that only OHS can provide," said Comptroller General David Walker at a hearing of the Senate Government Affairs Committee. "Despite a written request, meeting[s] and telephone conversations, to date we have not received this information."

The White House and congressional Democrats have been at odds over what the Democrats charge is administration secrecy on homeland defense policies and plans.

Thursday morning, Homeland Security Director Tom Ridge gave an off-the-record, closed-door briefing before the GOP-controlled House Government Reform Committee.

But Ridge again refused to give sworn congressional testimony on homeland defense issues, arguing that, as a presidential adviser, he would violate constitutional separation of powers protections.

Democratic committee members afterward said they found Thursday's session unsatisfactory and that they would press for formal public sessions in which Ridge would have to answer questions under oath and on the record. Senate Appropriations Committee Chairman Robert Byrd (D-W.Va.) has demanded the same.

"This secrecy is beginning to seem the hallmark of this administration," said Rep. Jan Schakowsky (D-Ill.) of the House Reform Committee. "It's important that we have him testify publicly. We need to know just what his job is. What we can expect from him. His operational function. What his plans are. His budgetary decisions. It's important if they want to give the American people confidence that they're trying to keep them safe."

'Inventing a problem'

Similar Democratic complaints were made Wednesday after Ridge gave an informal briefing to the House Appropriations Committee.

"As far as I'm concerned, some lawyer in the White House is inventing a problem that should not exist," said ranking minority member Rep. David Obey (D-Wis.). "We have had countless people in similar roles in the White House who have testified before Congress."

Republican members supported Ridge's refusal to give sworn testimony.

"National security is a serious business," said House Majority Leader Dick Armey (R-Texas). "Tom Ridge is a serious person, and I for one will not only support him but applaud him if he says, 'No, I don't have time to go up here and indulge your politics.'"

In his testimony, Comptroller General Walker raised concerns about the way the White House's \$38 billion budget for homeland defense this year will be spent.

Critic raises concerns

"While we believe that a robust homeland security program is critical to the nation's protection and prosperity, it must be developed in a manner that is targeted to areas of greatest need and avoids wasteful, unfocused or 'hitchhiker' spending," he said. "Moreover, the new commitments will compete with and increase the pressure on other important priorities within the budget."

He said the administration has not yet set homeland defense goals or established a means to measure the effectiveness of security programs.

Congress has a legitimate oversight role in assessing homeland defense plans, operations and spending, Walker said.

The General Accounting Office--the investigative arm of Congress, which Walker heads--is responding to more than 60 requests from senators and House members for information on aspects of homeland security, including public health, protection of critical infrastructure and border security, he said.

"Effective accountability cannot be achieved without adequate congressional oversight, and effective oversight cannot be achieved without appropriate access to records and other information," Walker said. "In this regard, our efforts to assist the Congress in obtaining information from the OHS have to date not borne fruit. We have tried to engage the Office both formally and informally . . . It is important that we begin to receive information we need."