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African 'Blood Diamonds' Targeted by Congressman via an Unsought Appropriation

By Justin Rood, CQ Staff

Spurred by concerns over al Qaeda's suspected involvement in the underground West African diamond trade, a powerful Republican congressman has demanded the FBI open an office there and given it money it did not ask for to investigate.

Rep. Frank R. Wolf, R-Va., chairman of the Commerce, Justice, State and the Judiciary Appropriations Subcommittee, inserted \$2 million in the 2005 omnibus appropriations for the FBI to establish an office in an as-yet-to-be-determined West African country to track so-called blood diamonds, local gems traded by criminals and rebels for arms.

"I put it in because there's problems [in the region] with blood diamonds, and diamonds connected to al Qaeda," Wolf said in a telephone interview. "That's why we need an FBI agent out in that region."

At Wolf's urging, FBI agents have traveled to the region twice in the past two years to investigate reports that al Qaeda operatives were involved in buying and trading black market diamonds from rebel groups operating in the area from the late 1990s through 2001.

Evidence of the connection first surfaced in reports by The Washington Post in 2002 and has since been bolstered by other investigations in the area, conducted by the Special Court of Sierra Leone and the human rights organization Global Witness, both concerned with human rights abuses in the region.

The FBI and the CIA dispute the accuracy of those findings. In particular, the FBI said its investigations had failed to corroborate those reports.

The FBI did not return calls for comment Wednesday.

"It's all been strange," said Vance Serchuk, a research associate specializing in security policy and Africa at the American Enterprise Institute. Although American officials have been skeptical about the reports of al Qaeda's involvement in the West African blood diamond trade, European intelligence officials are believers, he added.

"We just don't know," Serchuk said. "That's a reflection of the lack of resources we've put into the region."

Out of Africa

Since the end of the Cold War, and facing emerging threats elsewhere, the CIA and others have withdrawn their intelligence assets from West Africa, believing it was of little strategic importance, Serchuk said.

The idea of putting more people back in there, he said, "is absolutely necessary and right."

The 9/11 commission also did not endorse reports of al Qaeda operations in West Africa in its final report, but it did say it was one of the best regions in the world in which to base

terrorist operations and urged the national security community to focus its attention there.

Over the past decade, the FBI has been building a broad international presence for itself, opening offices in 45 countries.

This year, it requested and received funding to open five new overseas offices, where the agents are known as legats, bureau argot for legal attachés.

By citing the need to track down terrorist-related leads, the FBI garnered 2005 funds to open offices in Baghdad, Beirut, Kuwait City and Cape Town, South Africa. The agency received funds to open an office in Dakar, Senegal, by explaining that it was expensive to continually send agents from its Paris office to cover that troubled area.

Although Congress supports the FBI's continued expansion abroad, CIA officials bristle when they hear of the FBI moving beyond its traditional domestic law enforcement role.

"If the task is to send them to West Africa to track Nigerian money and fraud, fine," said one former senior CIA operations official. But they should not be tracking terrorists and their networks abroad, said the official, who is now in private business and asked not to be named.

"Shouldn't the [Central Intelligence] Agency work with liaison services to find them?"

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