

COMING MONDAY

■ Houston A+ Challenge sees the arrival of new Superintendent Terry Grier as a golden opportunity to achieve remarkable things at HISD.

EDITORIALS | COMMENTARY | OPINION | LETTERS TO THE EDITOR | POLITICAL CARTOONS | VOICES

SECURITY



LUIS ROBAYO: AFP/GETTY IMAGES

WEAPONS SEIZURE: Soldiers seized a cache of weapons in Colombia earlier this month from the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) guerrilla forces.

Case outlines potential terror threat to U.S.

■ Hezbollah may be seeking narco-terror ties

By JOAN NEUHAUS SCHAAN

An indictment was unsealed recently in New York federal court detailing facts that confirm the potent and rarely discussed threat that is building at our doorstep. An alleged Hezbollah member with a cache of weapons stored in Mexico was offering to sell weapons to the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), a narco-terrorist organization. The weapons were stolen from Iraq. The cache, for sale in 2008, included military rifles, rocket-propelled grenades, C-4 plastic explosives and surface-to-air missiles.

The troubling aspect of United States v. Jamal Yousef is the collaboration between potent adversaries historically viewed as independent of one another. Buried in this indictment are daunting and very real implications:

■ Hezbollah maintains sensitive operations in Mexico and is an active participant in Mexican weapons trafficking there;

■ Hezbollah is willing to join forces with narco-terrorist organizations to destabilize host countries in the Americas, and;

■ The weapons could easily be smuggled into the United States.

Hezbollah is a terrorist organization supported by the Iranian government and is no stranger to open hostilities. One need only recall the thousands of missiles and rockets the organization fired upon Israel in the summer of 2006, the many operations carried out in Lebanon and the bombing of Jewish sites in Buenos Aires in 1992 and 1994.

Historically there have been references to Hezbollah operations in Mexico, but rarely are details released. For example, in 2005 congressional testimony, Rep. Edward Royce, R-Calif., mentioned the dismantling of a Hezbollah smuggling cell in Mexico and the organization's sophisticated weaponry, including



OSWALDO PAEZ: ASSOCIATED PRESS

CONFISCATED: A police officer looks over weapons confiscated from the FARC rebel group in Colombia.

rockets and missiles. Congressional testimony in years past has touched upon the ominous specter of Islamic extremists collaborating with narco-terrorists, but members of the intelligence community did not divulge specifics at the time.

To make the scenario more worrisome, Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez has, according to press reports, harbored Hezbollah for years, placed affiliated persons in his Interior Ministry, openly courted Iran and financially supported al-Qaida. When considering that Iran appears close to not only having rockets such as the Shabab-5 capable of reaching the United States from Venezuela, but nuclear warheads as well, the possibility of reliving the Cuban missile crisis does not seem so remote. In December 2008, a shipment labeled "tractor parts" was intercepted during shipment from Iran to Venezuela and found to have "laboratory equipment capable of producing explosives," although radioactivity was not found on the equipment.

The question remains: Is the level of violence found in other areas where narco-terrorists and Islamic terrorists collaborate, such as Afghanistan, Colombia and Mexico, arriving at our doorstep? If one were to consider the car bombing in El Paso last fall, the charges against U.S. military personnel serving as cartel hit men, and the increasing assassinations and kidnappings on U.S. soil, it might be safe to say the violence has already arrived. Only one month ago, a drug cartel member serving as a U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement informant was assassinated in El Paso. The suspected triggerman is a U.S. serviceman stationed at Fort Bliss and also served as an informant.

While Iranian nuclear proliferation has garnered headlines and been debated by Congress, many are baffled that legislators are not more focused on the looming strategic threat to the homeland posed by terrorist organizations such as Iran-sponsored Hezbollah teaming with narco-terrorists, Mexican drug cartels and rogue nations in our hemisphere, such as Venezuela. Perhaps the source of the problem is the tendency of law enforcement officials to refrain from talking about Hezbollah's involvement in activities, preferring to label an activity as being simply illegal. In turn, refraining from identifying activity as Hezbollah-related may be the function of the difficulty in proving Hezbollah associations without divulging sensitive sources and methods. Regardless, the time has come to dedicate greater attention and resources to this very real threat.

Schaan is the fellow for Homeland Security & Terrorism Programs at the James A. Baker III Institute for Public Policy.

THE ECONOMY

Houston needs plan of action for downturn

Privatizing golf courses, monetizing land under sports facilities among options city should consider

By CARROLL G. ROBINSON and MICHAEL O. ADAMS

THESE are tough economic times. Individuals, families and businesses have to make tough decisions about their spending priorities. So

too must our city.

Until the local, state, national and international economies fully recover and once again start to grow, our city must develop and implement a plan of action to avoid cutting essential city services or raising our property tax rate or charging new fees for basic city services.

The next mayor and City Council must consolidate city departments to reduce expenses and enhance economies of scale. Local business schools and public administration programs should be invited to do a pro bono assessment of the structure and operation of city government and to make recommendations for improvements. Technology must also be used to increase efficiencies, reduce cost and enhance customer service.

Nonessential city projects and transfers of money out of the general operating fund must be eliminated. Privatized projects must be fully self sustaining.

All the golf courses now operated by the city should be subject to a round of managed competition. They should be put out for bid as a single package. The results of this effort should be reviewed by the city controller to determine if it is a cost saver.

The mayor and Council must secure legislative authority, as needed, to use hotel/motel and liquor taxes to help pay for essential city services such as public safety, picking up our garbage and improving our flood control and drainage system.

They should also work with the Legislature and Harris County Commissioners Court to eliminate the Sports Authority and divide its debt and revenue stream between the city and county. Those funds

Please see **ACTION**, Page B11

FORE: A golfer takes a shot in the shadow of the Williams Tower at the city-owned Memorial Park Golf Course. The city could consider privatizing its courses to help it get through the economic downturn.



JAMES NIELSEN: CHRONICLE