



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Statement of Chairman Bennie G. Thompson

“The Challenge of Protecting Mass Gatherings in a Post-9/11 World”

July 9, 2008 (Washington) – Today, Committee on Homeland Security Chairman Bennie G. Thompson (D-MS) delivered the following prepared remarks for the full Committee hearing entitled ‘The Challenge of Protecting Mass Gatherings in a Post-9/11 World’:

“When Americans think of ‘mass gatherings’ – events like the Super Bowl, the National Conventions, and the Pope’s recent visit come to mind. How the Department of Homeland Security manages and coordinates these high-profile National Security Events is certainly worthy of discussion but that is a discussion for another day. Today, we turn our attention to the challenges of securing mass gatherings that: are not considered ‘National Special Security Events’; do not have the Federal government coming in to run security; and are held in communities that do not have huge amounts of resources for security.

Think of State Fairs, collegiate sporting events, and even large shopping complexes during the holiday season.

Mass gatherings, whether they have National Security event rating or not, could be particularly tempting targets for Al Qaeda and other terrorist organizations with the goals of: killing and injuring the most people, destroying the most infrastructure, and having the greatest impact possible with the least amount of effort.

As you all know, I have made it a priority to look at mass gatherings of all types. In fact, last year, I directed Committee staff to explore a variety of venues to see how mass gatherings are being handled. At these venues, Committee staff observed members of the public and private sectors working to ensure the health, safety, and security of all involved. They found that support personnel at these venues are doing the best they can with what they have, especially when they do not have the benefit of substantial Federal support. This exploration culminated in a report that the Majority Staff of the Committee released in May entitled ‘Public Health, Safety, and Security for Mass Gatherings.’ The report concluded that while local and State officials’ efforts are laudable, the Federal government needs to partner with them in three particular areas: countering biological threats, collaborative planning; and partnering across sectors.

Among the report’s recommendations were that the Department of Homeland Security help the localities hosting these mass gatherings now by: strengthening public health and other critical infrastructures, establishing comprehensive biological surveillance systems, and ensuring that intelligence about biological threats is made actionable for decision-makers on the scene. It is remarkable is how State, local, and private sector partners have worked together to develop solutions on their own, given the absence of dedicated Federal resources. Fighting a common fight, they have established trusted relationships with other very different entities and that trust serves as the basis for sharing information and resources that would not otherwise occur.

The Department of Homeland Security could stand to learn a lesson about information sharing here. The Department of Homeland Security should also take note that the districts that the Members of this Committee represent are diverse. Some are largely rural while others decidedly urban. However, when it comes to mass gatherings, we all share the same goal: ensuring that our communities are prepared for – and can respond to – the challenges of protecting mass gatherings. “

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