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U.S. Congressmen Meet With FSB About Boston Bombing

By Jonathan Earle

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No specific intelligence lapse allowed the two brothers suspected of bombing the Boston Marathon in April to evade apprehension before the attack, a group of U.S. lawmakers said Sunday at the conclusion of a fact-finding trip to Russia that included a meeting with the Federal Security Service.

"There's nothing specific that could have been done that we can point to, that if it had been done differently would have prevented this," said Rep. Dana Rohrabacher (R-California), chairman of the Subcommittee on Europe, Eurasia and Emerging Threats, who led the six-person delegation.

Officials and experts have said U.S. and Russian counterterrorism authorities failed to work together to connect the dots about suspect Tamerlan Tsarnaev's growing interest in Islamic jihad and plans to detonate two bombs near the marathon finish line, explosions that killed 3 and injured 264.

Rohrabacher said better counterterrorism cooperation could have prevented the bombings.

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"Had we had a much higher level of cooperation all along, so that the whole situation would have been different, I believe that that would have been one of the types of things we could have thwarted," he told reporters at a press-conference on Sunday at the U.S. Embassy.

The FSB alerted U.S. authorities to Tamerlan's possible extremist links in early 2011. The FBI has said that the FSB did not reply to a follow-up request for more information, while the FSB has accused U.S. officials of failing to notify it about Tamerlan's departure for Russia's troubled Dagestan region in 2012.

But the representatives presented few concrete proposals for how counterterrorism cooperation might be improved, with Rohrabacher saying that the biggest obstacle was simply Cold War-era mistrust.

"The Cold War is over now, so we have to move on and we have to make friends with the Russians and recognize that there's a mutual threat now to both of us," Rohrabacher said, referring to radical Islam and China.

Rep. Steve King (R-Iowa) said the FBI did not ask Russia for background checks on asylum seekers from the North Caucasus, home to a simmering Islamist insurgency and where the Tsarnaev brothers had historical ties. "That I believe is a huge hole in security in the United States, the cooperation has been offered to us, and it's time we close that hole," King said.

Such background checks might have identified Tamerlan and his mother, Zubeidat Tsarnaeva, who according to the FSB were "inclined to be radical" when they first arrived in the United States in 2003, when Tamerlan was still a teenager, King said, citing a hitherto secret assessment provided to the delegation by the FSB.

"I suspect that [Tamerlan] was raised to do what he did," King said, praising the FSB as "very open."

But Rep. Steve Cohen (D-Tennessee) said he had a different recollection of the FSB meeting, one of several instances in which the congressmen disagreed during the press conference. In Cohen's version, the FSB said it made such an assessment only around 2010, years after the Tsarnaevs arrived in the U.S.

The congressmen also disagreed over Pussy Riot, the punk-protest band that saw three members jailed for two years for a Feb. 2012 concert inside the Christ the Savior Cathedral in central Moscow during which they sang lyrics condemning President Vladimir Putin. One

bandmember was later released.

Cohen, a member of the Helsinki Foundation human rights group, suggested that the girls' jail sentence constituted excessive punishment, while Rohrabacher referred to them as "the group that invaded the church" and King said "those riots" "desecrated" the Russian Orthodox chapel.

"It's hard for me to find sympathy for people who would do that to peoples' faith. And if anyone came into my church — and I'm a Roman Catholic — and did that, it would be awfully difficult for me to stand up and say they have a human right do to that," King said.

The congressional delegation was also seen as a goodwill mission. The three delegates at Sunday's news conference said it was the first such delegation to visit Russia since the passage of the U.S. Magnitsky Act, which called for sanctions against suspected Russian human rights abusers, a measure that infuriated Russian officials.

Days later, Putin signed a law banning U.S. parents from adopting Russian orphans, officially a response to a string of abuse scandals. About 60,000 such adoptions have taken place in the past two decades.

Washington has lobbied for the ban to be reversed or watered down. Cohen said the delegation had broached the subject but not achieved any breakthroughs. Russia has not set any conditions under which the adoptions could resume, Cohen said, adding that he expected President Barack Obama to discuss the issue with Putin at two upcoming meetings.

Senior Russian officials have recently sent mixed signals about whether repealing the ban is possible, with State Duma Deputy Yelena Mizulina, head of the Committee on Family, Women and Children, saying that "any law can be revisited," and children's ombudsman Pavel Astakhov declaring that there's no turning back on the issue.

The delegates had help from Hollywood actor Steven Seagal, who claimed to have requested the meeting with the Federal Security Service, and whom Rohrabacher said helped arrange a trip to Beslan in the North Ossetia, site of a horrific terrorist attack in 2004, and a separate meeting with Deputy Prime Minister Dmitry Rogozin.

"He can shake his head 'no,' but the fact of the matter is that yes, I did," Seagal said of the FSB meeting, as Steve Cohen (D-TN), standing next to Seagal, shook his head. Seagal was dressed in black and wore yellow-tinted glasses.

Rohrabacher said Seagal was instrumental in arranging a meeting with Deputy Prime Minister Dmitry Rogozin. "I don't know if [Rogozin] would have been available to us without Steven actually suggesting that he do that," Rohrabacher said.

Rohrabacher said he has known Seagal for "a number of years," and that Seagal "knows my interest in thwarting radical Islamic terrorism, and we have conferred about this before."

Members of the delegation not present at the press conference were Reps. Michele Bachmann, R-Minn, Paul Cook, R-Calif., and William Keating, D-Mass., ranking member on the Subcommittee on Europe, Eurasia and Emerging Threats.

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