

Panel says FAA played down 9-11 risk

BY HOPE YEN
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

WASHINGTON — Months before the Sept. 11 attacks, the Federal Aviation Administration played down the possibility of suicide hijackings, saying the greater threat was from explosives smuggled aboard planes, according to a federal panel investigating the attacks.

The preliminary report released Tuesday by the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States said that in a presentation to airline and airport officials in early 2001, the FAA discounted the threat of a suicide hijacking because there was

"no indication that any group is currently thinking in that direction."

In July 2001, the FAA issued a warning to air carriers but did not mention suicide hijackings. Instead, it focused on the possibility that some terrorist groups might conceal explosive devices inside luggage.

Bush administration officials have maintained that before the attacks there was no indication terrorists were considering suicide hijackings. The report said the FAA's Office of Civil Aviation Security officially considered the possibility of suicide hijackings as early as March 1998.

The report acknowledged there

was no specific intelligence indicating suicide hijackings would occur but said the FAA still had a responsibility to protect the flying public against such a threat.

The 10-member, bipartisan commission was established by Congress to study the nation's preparedness before Sept. 11 and its response to the attacks, and to make recommendations for guarding against similar disasters.

On Monday, the first day of a two-day public hearing, the commission said U.S. authorities missed some obvious signs that might have prevented some of the Sept. 11 hijackers from entering the country.

Government officials have

said the 19 hijackers entered the country legally, but the panel said its investigation found at least two and as many as eight had fraudulent visas. The commission also found examples in which U.S. officials had contact with the hijackers but failed to adequately investigate suspicious behavior.

The panel also found that at least six of the hijackers violated immigration laws by overstaying their visas or failing to attend the English language school for which their visas were issued.

The commission said part of the problem was a lack of coordination among immigration officials and a focus on keeping out illegal

immigrants rather than keeping out potential terrorists.

The commission said it can't finish its final report by the May 27 deadline imposed by Congress and asked for an extension of at two months. The Bush administration and Republican congressional leaders have said they oppose such a move.

Commissioners decided they needed more time because the group had been bogged down by disputes with the administration and New York City authorities over access to documents and witnesses, according to a person familiar with the commission who spoke on condition of anonymity.

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hrtm 340	1
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phil 110	13
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retl 485	1
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socy E101	801
sowk 302	1
sowk 303	1
sowk 718	9
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