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NSA to defend against hackers

Privacy fears raised as spy agency turns to systems protection
Sun Exclusive

September 20, 2007 | By Siobhan Gorman | Siobhan Gorman, Sun reporter

"The hostile groups have caught on to most of the things we're worried about," said Scott Borg, director of the U.S. Cyber Consequences Unit, a nonprofit research institute that advises the government and the private sector. "It's been remarkable in the last, really, two years how much all these things that people like me have been worried about have been bit by bit rediscovered and reinvented in the hacker world."

Potential cyberattacks are being discussed in chat rooms in languages that include English, Arabic, Russian and Punjabi, he said. Terrorists and others already know many of the country's vulnerabilities, Borg said, adding that he is extremely concerned about the ability to hack into computer systems controlling nuclear power plants.

A government task force issued a stark warning this year that the threat of a cyberattack to U.S. infrastructure, which can be launched from a computer anywhere in the world, is "very real and growing rapidly." In June, an alleged Chinese hacking effort shut down e-mail in Defense Secretary Robert M. Gates' office for several days.

Simulation exercises, such as one dubbed Dark Angel and sponsored by the group Professionals for Cyber Defense, showed in 2003 how a cyberattack could shut down most of the nation's power grid, Saydjari said.

There is growing interest among hackers in capturing information on "smart cards" that allow access to buildings and critical computer systems and using that information to gain access to the system, according to Borg.

Cybersecurity has long been an orphaned responsibility in the federal government, with various agencies having some part in it. The NSA has largely been left out, because its focus has been on protecting military networks. Proposals to break off the NSA's information security branch and assign it a broader role beyond the intelligence agencies fell flat, former NSA officials say.

Amit Yoran, the Homeland Security Department's first chief of cybersecurity, said in an interview that while the government has made progress, federal efforts have been "somewhat spotty" overall.

Among the main challenges, he said, is that the Homeland Security Department has been given responsibility for the problem but lacks the authority and expertise to compel other agencies and the private sector to follow its lead.

The new cybersecurity effort aims to build, in part, on an existing NSA program, code-named Turbulence, which has had a troubled start, the senior intelligence official said.

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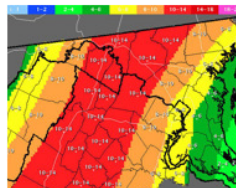
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