

Militias On the Rise, Police Told

Specialist Sees Groups Going on Offensive

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TOWSON, Md., May 9—Growing anti-government sentiment has spawned more than 180 violence-prone militia groups across the United States in recent years, dozens of them affiliated with white supremacy organizations, a national researcher told police here today.

In one of the first efforts to quantify the militia movement since the deadly Oklahoma City bombing April 19, Danny Welch, director of the Klanwatch Project of the Southern Poverty Law Center, based in Montgomery, Ala., said the "extreme anti-government sentiment of the militias mixed with white supremacy creates ... a dangerous combination."

Addressing more than 700 police officers and other criminal justice officials at a conference on hate crimes, Welch said members of his organization were "shocked by the magnitude of the [Oklahoma] bombing ... but not by the fact that something like this was going to happen."

Timothy James McVeigh, the only person charged in the bombing, and James Douglas Nichols and Terry Lynn Nichols, brothers from Michigan who are friends of McVeigh's, all have been described by investigators as having ties to militias.

Welch said that despite the growing presence of militias, most extremist violence in recent times has been perpetrated by individuals, not organized groups.

In an interview, he said, evidence suggests that militias, concerned about federal and state limits on gun possession, "are now mostly defensive, but some are on the verge of going on the offensive."

The conference here, planned well before the Oklahoma bombing, in which at least 167 people died, drew police, prosecutors and prison officials

from several states to assess what Welch and other speakers said is the proliferation of extremist groups.

Several Maryland officials, led by Lt. Gov. Kathleen Kennedy Townsend (D) and State Police Superintendent David B. Mitchell, called for swift justice against hate crimes, especially those on the scale of the Oklahoma City bombing.

"We stand for the proposition that

*"Anti-government
sentiment ... mixed
with white*

*supremacy creates
... a dangerous
combination."*

—Klanwatch Director Danny Welch

this will never happen again," said U.S. Attorney Lynne A. Battaglia, Maryland's top federal prosecutor.

Welch, whose Klanwatch Project has monitored extremist groups for more than two decades, created a "militia task force" in October to measure the presence of private paramilitary groups.

As of today, Klanwatch spokeswoman Laurie Wood said in a telephone interview, 204 militias have been identified in 36 states, "and we're adding new ones every day." She said they are "really diverse, in rural areas and big towns."

The total includes at least two in Virginia, Wood said, but none in Maryland or the District. Maryland State Police also have said they have no evidence of militias in Maryland.

Wood cautioned that the existence of some of the 204 groups has not been independently verified. Most are easily identified, she said, through militia publications, but a few reported by witnesses lack names or other identifying features.

A full list will be published at the end of May and circulated to more than 6,000 law enforcement agencies, Wood said.

The Southern Poverty Law Center also is sending letters to the attorneys general of all 50 states, urging a crackdown on paramilitary groups. The letters ask the states to invoke rarely used laws prohibiting private militias and paramilitary training. Thirty-seven states, including Maryland and Virginia, have some form of such laws.

Welch would not estimate the membership strength of militias in the United States, saying their secrecy makes it nearly impossible. Some law enforcement organizations have issued estimates as high as 100,000. The Anti-Defamation League of B'nai B'rith, which monitors extremist groups, has put their number at no more than 10,000.

Welch said there is evidence that 37 white supremacy groups have formed ties with militias, "bringing cohesion to an otherwise disjointed set of racist organizations." Mira Boland, chief fact finder for the Washington office of the Anti-Defamation League, said the number is smaller.