

Intelligence Gathering, Leaks Dominate US News

From VOA Learning English, this is In the News.

This week, a U.S. military judge ruled in the case of Army Private Bradley Manning. The soldier was found guilty of espionage for providing secrets to the anti-secrecy website *WikiLeaks*. The court also found him guilty of several other charges. The punishment for these crimes could add up to more than 100 years in prison. The Oklahoma native was found not guilty of aiding the enemy. That charge could have resulted in a life prison sentence.

Manning had admitted to what is called the largest leak of secret U.S. documents in history. The documents included secret diplomatic messages and military reports about the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

The case was tried at Fort Meade, Maryland, close to the grounds of the National Security Agency. That is where intelligence contractor Edward Snowden once worked. He recently leaked secret documents on government efforts to collect information about American citizens.

On Wednesday, members of Congress met with intelligence and law enforcement officials. The officials said the U.S. government's information gathering does not violate the privacy of citizens. And they said these activities help to identify and defeat terrorist threats.

The officials spoke after the Obama administration released documents that described the government's telephone data collection programs.

Patrick Leahy is chairman of the Senate Judiciary Committee.

"The patience of the American people is beginning to wear thin. But what has to be of more concern in a democracy is, the trust of the American people is wearing thin."

On Wednesday, the administration released what once were secret documents about the government's collection of telephone records. Deputy Attorney General James Cole spoke to the Senate committee.

"These are telephone records maintained by the phone companies. They include the number the call was dialed from, the number the call was dialed to, the date and time of the call and the length of the call. The records do not include the names or other personal identifying information. They do not include cell site or other location information, and they do not include the content of any phone calls."

The government must have special court approval to get names or addresses linked to phone numbers. It also needs a court order to listen to phone calls.

Rhode Island Senator Sheldon Whitehouse questioned the lack of voluntary public disclosure by the government.

“We have a lot of good information out there that helps the American public understand these programs. But it all came out late. It all came out in response to a leaker [Edward Snowden]. There was no organized plan for how we rationally declassify this, so that the American people can participate in the debate.”

The American Civil Liberties Union, an organization that supports individual rights, has criticized the government for collecting so much information. The group says this will change the way people act and prevent them from enjoying their freedoms under the U.S. Constitution.

The top lawyer for the Office of the Director of National Intelligence, Robert Litt, told lawmakers he disagrees.

“Collection of this kind of telephone metadata from the telephone companies is not a violation of anyone’s constitutional rights.”

Mr. Litt told the Senate committee that public disclosure of the programs has damaged the government’s ability to protect the nation.

And that’s In the News from VOA Learning English. I’m Steve Ember.