

FBI Checked on Critics of Its Library Probes

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WASHINGTON—The FBI ran background checks on more than 250 Americans who protested a controversial library surveillance program in an effort to learn whether the critics were backed by Soviet intelligence services, according to FBI documents released Saturday.

An FBI spokesman acknowledged that the bureau had run "minimal checks" on critics of the program, but he insisted that the FBI had not undertaken a large-scale effort to discredit librarians or civil libertarians who objected to the library visits.

The FBI counterintelligence program targeted scientific and technical librarians, mostly in the New York metropolitan area, for special scrutiny because of suspi-

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FBI: Critics of Its Library Program Were Investigated

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cions that Soviet bloc agents were combing the stacks for valuable technical data.

Meanwhile Saturday, in a separate domestic spying case, FBI officials said the bureau will purge its files of the names of persons and groups it collected in its now-discredited investigation of Americans who protested U.S. policy in El Salvador.

The disclosures about the so-called "Library Awareness Program" came in 1,200 previously-secret documents obtained under the Freedom of Information Act by the National Security Archive. The private Washington group sued the FBI for the papers in conjunction with the American Library Assn. The two organizations contend that the library surveillance effort violated constitutional freedoms and state privacy laws.

Beginning in the 1960s, FBI agents contacted at least 21 librarians and asked librarians to watch for "suspicious" users or those with foreign-sounding names and report them to the bureau.

After the program was publi-

cized in 1987 by angry librarians and civil libertarians, the FBI ran checks of 266 people "to determine whether a Soviet active measures campaign had been initiated to discredit the Library Awareness Program," according to a Feb. 6, 1989, internal FBI memo released by the National Security Archive.

"Active measures" is a U.S. government term referring to Soviet espionage or propaganda activities. Sheryl Walter, associate general counsel of the National Security Archive, derided the memo's suggestion that the archive or the library association were funded by or inspired by Soviet spy agencies.

"Unequivocally not," she said. "We have nothing to do with the KGB."

FBI spokesman Mill Ahlerich described the library surveillance program as "a very narrowly focused investigative activity in New York City, a threat-driven program targeted at the threat of hostile intelligence activities we believed were ongoing in certain scientific and technical libraries."

He would not comment on whether the program still exists,

but he said the bureau occasionally contacts or visits libraries as part of counterintelligence or criminal investigations.

In the separate matter of the FBI investigation of those who protested U.S. policy in El Salvador, Ahlerich said, bureau files will be turned over to the National Archives after the names of confidential informants and other sensitive data have been deleted.

FBI Director William S. Sessions disclosed the plan to transfer records of the bureau's 1983-85 investigation of the Coalition in Solidarity, with the People of El Salvador (CISPES) in a letter to Rep. Don Edwards (D-San Jose).

Sessions conceded last year that the FBI overstepped its bounds by conducting domestic surveillance of political groups allied with CISPES.

Six FBI agents were disciplined and the Senate Intelligence Committee sharply criticized the investigation, which took place under former FBI Director William H. Webster, now director of the CIA.

"Transfer of the records to the archives will protect the thousands

of innocent individuals whose names appear in those files even though they were not even suspected of anything illegal," Edwards, chairman of the House Judiciary subcommittee on civil and constitutional rights, said in a statement.

"This will ensure that the files will not damage someone in a future background investigation," Edwards said.