

To win the war against terrorism, the needs to teach foreign languages to more military personnel at sites like Offutt Air Force Base, the chairman of the House Intelligence Committee said Monday after touring the Bellevue base.

"It does us no good to listen to al-Qaida calling into the if we can't understand what they're saying," said Rep. Pete Hoekstra, R-Mich.

Hoekstra spent several hours at the base with Rep. Lee Terry, R-Neb., touring military intelligence operations housed there with the 55th Wing and U.S. Strategic Command.

Last year, Offutt dedicated a new training center where members of the 55th Wing learn in-demand foreign languages.

After touring the base, both congressmen said they came away convinced the facility needed to be expanded.

"They've gone from a couple years ago - when Congress first said 'make this a priority' - from 300 trainees to about 500 now," Terry said. "That's a mission that still requires a great deal of expansion."

The 55th Wing's primary mission is aerial intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance, and StratCom heads the Department of Defense's global intelligence operations.

Hoekstra, who had never before visited Offutt, said he was impressed with the base's commitment to language training but said more needed to be done in Bellevue and across the military.

"I think they're hearing the message that Congress is sending - that we need more, better, faster when it comes to language skills," he said.

Hoekstra said he also spoke with officials about efforts to better combine military intelligence with the information gathered by domestic groups like the FBI and by foreign allies.

Since the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, those efforts have progressed significantly, he said, pointing to the foiled plot earlier this month to bomb airliners leaving the United Kingdom .

"It was really seamless between the intelligence outside the country, the intelligence inside . . . and intelligence. I'm not sure we could have pulled that off two years ago," he said.

Still, Hoekstra said he believes much work remains in reforming intelligence-gathering.

"We're still not where we need to be," he said. "We were good enough to stop those terrorists on that day in , and I think we've made tremendous progress in bringing the military and civilian intelligence communities together. But we realize there's still more work to be done."

Terry said the visit drove home the national role Offutt plays in military intelligence-gathering operations.

"We're not just living in an information-based economy, we have an information-based military now. The only way to stop the next terrorist attack is to have the information beforehand," he said. "So our base here has an incredibly important role in national security."

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