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FBI scoffs at Qaddafi suicide teams

By Bill Gertz
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U.S. terrorism experts believe threats by Libyan leader Col. Muammar Qaddafi to send masses of suicide terrorists into the streets of America are implausible, according to a senior FBI official.

"I think it's a complete fabrication," Oliver B. Revell, FBI executive assistant director, said in an interview. "The operations they have had here weren't planned as suicide operations at all — they made elaborate plans for escape."

Col. Qaddafi told reporters in Libya shortly after terrorist attacks in Rome and Vienna Dec. 27 that, if provoked, he would send 10,000 suicide commandos in a wave of terrorist attacks on U.S. targets.

The Libyan leader said his terrorists would "follow Americans in their own streets" if the United States and Israel used force to respond to what U.S. officials charge was Libyan backing for the terrorist attacks in Rome and Vienna that left 19 dead, including five Americans.

The threat was repeated Monday in Tripoli by Libyan military commander Maj. Saeed Ali Awedat who told reporters "yes, all Libyans are training for suicide operations [and] we are ready to launch such missions against the United States and Israel."

While Mr. Revell said U.S. experts considered and dismissed Col. Qaddafi's threat of a wave of attacks, the FBI has been on alert against individual Libyan-inspired terrorist acts by Libyan emigres or students in the United States.

"This does not mean that [Col. Qaddafi] can't activate a certain apparatus and send people to carry out terrorist acts, or activate people in place to carry out terrorist acts," said Mr. Revell, who is the senior FBI official in charge of counterterrorism programs.

"Obviously that is a potential," he said, "but a wave of 10,000 suicide

bombers is not one of the things we are concerned about."

Asked if fanatical Shi'ite Moslem fundamentalists would be able to carry out Col. Qaddafi's plans, Mr. Revell replied that a person capable of undertaking a suicide bombing probably would be young and highly indoctrinated. Such people would be easy to detect entering the United States, he said.

"When asked to do something by Syria or Iran or perhaps even by Qaddafi — that's 'do-able' in Lebanon," Mr. Revell said, "but there haven't been any indications that they can transfer that very far."

Highly trained terrorist groups, like the Abu Nidal group credited with the Rome and Vienna attacks, pose a much greater threat since they "are much more sophisticated, much more experienced at carrying out planned terrorist attacks," he said.

"And even there, those were not suicide missions — they had escape plans," Mr. Revell said. "Obviously there's a high risk involved, but they didn't go in with the intention of blowing themselves up. They intended to hijack El Al [Israel Airlines] aircraft and do other things."

Regarding other potential terrorist threats, Mr. Revell said federal agents maintain close watch on Cuban officials stationed in the United States since Cuba has been linked to domestic terrorism and could provide an infrastructure for future terrorist activities.

He said federal authorities last summer uncovered direct Cuban involvement in a Puerto Rican terrorist group known as the Macheteros, or machete-wielders. As a result authorities have been on guard against potential Cuban-backed terrorism.

The Macheteros have committed nine terrorist attacks since 1978, including a Jan. 25, 1985, rocket attack against a federal building in Puerto Rico with weapons later traced to Vietnam and Cuba.

"The Castro government is continuing to support insurgencies and terrorist activities throughout the Western hemisphere," Mr. Revell said. "We certainly would have to be naive not to be concerned about the potential for Cuban-instigated activities in the United States."

Currently, 56 Cuban diplomats, plus an unknown number of staff, operate out of Cuba's United Nations mission in New York and its interests section in Washington. Half of the diplomats are suspected operatives of the Cuban DGI intelligence service, according to U.S. officials.