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Money-tracking leak angers Cheney

US Vice-President Dick Cheney has condemned as "offensive" US media disclosures of a secret programme that probes global financial transactions.



Dick Cheney said the disclosures were "disturbing"

The government has covertly tracked thousands of international money transactions for nearly five years as part of its so-called war on terror.

Mr Cheney said leaking the programme played into the enemy's hands.

The New York Times defended its coverage, saying the information was in the public's interest.

'Solid and sound'

Speaking in Chicago, Mr Cheney said the disclosures, which went ahead despite appeals from the White House, would make it more difficult for the administration to prevent future attacks.

The operation uses a huge financial database in Belgium, known as Swift, to track private money transfers around the world.

But civil liberty groups have raised concerns that the programme, which began soon after the 9/11 attacks in the US, may infringe individual rights to privacy.

Mr Cheney said: "These are good, solid sound programmes. They are conducted in accordance with the laws of the land."

“ This programme is making a real difference. It works ”

John Snow,
treasury secretary

He added: "What I find most disturbing is the fact that some in the media take it upon themselves to disclose vital national security programmes, thereby making it more difficult for us to prevent future attacks against the American people."

The programme had earlier also been defended by Treasury Secretary John Snow.

He called it an "effective weapon in the larger war on terror."

The treasury says the programme is strictly confined to the records of suspected foreign terrorists.

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The government had compelled Swift, the Society for Worldwide Interbank Financial Telecommunication, which links about 7,800 financial institutions around the world, to open its records, using subpoenas.

The New York Times, which revealed the programme, defended its coverage.


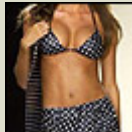

Executive editor Bill Keller said: "We remain convinced that the administration's extraordinary access to this vast repository of international financial data, however carefully targeted use of it may be, is a matter of public interest."

Although there is no direct connection, the scheme has echoes of a recently revealed US surveillance programme in which millions of international and domestic phone calls and e-mails were monitored, correspondents say.

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