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Port security to be a priority: \$605 million in new spending is intended for increased defences against terrorism

OTTAWA -- Bolstering security at marine ports will be among the priorities for \$605 million in new spending on defences against terrorism.

A more focused approach to analyzing threats and additional efforts to shore up border security are also among initiatives outlined in the federal budget Tuesday.

At the same time, the security charge paid by air passengers will fall to a maximum of \$12 -- from the current \$14 -- for round-trip travel within Canada.

The announcements come just days before Auditor General Sheila Fraser releases a report on federal security-related expenditures.

The new money brings to more than \$8.3 billion the federal total aimed at enhancing security following the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks on the United States.

In the December 2001 budget, the government allotted \$7.7 billion over five years to the fight against global terrorism, prevent extremists from finding haven in Canada and ensure the prosecution of terrorists.

The \$605 million, also to be spread over five years, will be used to address priorities such as marine and cyber security, intelligence, border protection, and better coordination of systems, information, threat assessments and emergency response.

Public Safety Minister Anne McLellan said the money, \$115 million of which will be earmarked for this fiscal year, represents a "substantial investment" in making Canada more secure.

Conservative MP Peter MacKay wasn't impressed, saying security was "a huge, gaping hole" in the budget since cuts have left Canada unable to properly patrol its own shores. "It's extremely disappointing given the fact that there is still a very real and present danger in North America."

Last month the Senate committee on national security and defence painted a bleak picture of lax enforcement measures at seaports and airports, complaining that initiatives supposedly adopted after the terrorist strikes were taking far too long to implement.

The possibility of a crude nuclear device or biological weapon turning up in a shipping container at a Canadian port has become a growing worry for security officials.

Canada's port authorities are waging a concerted lobby effort for federal cash to pay for better fencing, lighting and personnel security initiatives -- particularly since the U.S. government has doled out millions to American facilities.

Legislation currently before Parliament would allow the federal government to provide direct cash infusions to Canada's ports.

It is expected the millions tagged for port improvements and other measures in the budget will be dispersed in pending announcements.

McLellan confirmed Tuesday that Transport Minister Tony Valeri will be discussing an "enhanced marine security package in the weeks ahead."

The appointment last December of Robert Wright as national security adviser to Prime Minister Paul Martin signalled a desire to bring more focus to the analysis of security intelligence, currently scattered among several agencies.

Some of the money allocated Tuesday will help Wright work with the recently formed Public Safety Department, the RCMP, Canadian Security Intelligence Service and others to co-operate more closely on assessing terrorist threats.

The effort will build on the recent creation of a national security assessment centre housed at CSIS headquarters -- partly through the hiring of more staff.

Other funds will be earmarked for technological improvements, including completion of an RCMP project allowing the force to receive fingerprints electronically -- a move that could speed the processing of federal security clearances.

Of the original \$7.7 billion in security spending, \$2.2 billion was pegged for improvements to air travel measures, paid for by a surcharge tacked on each passenger ticket.

The Senate security committee has questioned whether Canadians are receiving value for the fee. It was reduced considerably in last year's budget.

Based on the latest financial projections, the fee now will drop further to \$6 for one-way air travel within Canada and to \$12 for round-trip travel.

The total charge on tickets to the United States will be \$10, while for other international travel it will be \$20.

Cliff Mackay, president of the Air Transport Association of Canada, said the reduction "will be good for travellers," adding it may increase business for airlines.