



FBI chief Robert Mueller, testifying before the 9/11 commission

needs. SAIC has countered that the project had 10 different FBI case managers who rejiggered the contract 36 times.

Numbers game. *U.S. News* reported on its website last week that the ultimate cost of a new case-management system may dwarf the budget of Virtual Case File. The report said that in a series of recent planning meetings for the fiscal-year 2007 budget, officials from Azmi's shop—the information-technology division—estimated the replacement costs at \$792 million. These officials also concluded, *U.S. News* reported, that most of the Virtual Case File hardware, which Mueller said could be reused, would soon become obsolete. The magazine reported that the bureau's head of finance, Joseph Ford, had reacted with consternation, stating that neither the Justice Department nor the Office of Management and Budget would approve such

Director Robert Mueller's efforts to transform the FBI are hobbled by a never-ending series of computer problems

By Chitra Ragavan

By any measure, it was a pretty rough week for the FBI, a week wrapped in waves of revelations that raised new questions about the bureau's ability to transform itself into a nimble agency capable of preventing terrorist attacks.

The week began with tough talk from some former members of the 9/11 commission about what they characterize as the FBI's failure to follow through on promises of fundamental reforms in the wake of the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks. That criticism was exacerbated by a congressional report that criticized the FBI for refusing to bail out of a failing and costly computerized case-management system; *U.S. News* then reported that FBI estimates for a replacement system were soaring into the hundreds of millions of dollars.

At week's end, still more bad news: The Justice Department's inspector general released a scathing analysis of the "widespread and longstanding deficiencies" in the bureau's handling of terrorism and intelligence cases before the 9/11 attacks. The inspector general's report also said the bureau had muffed five opportunities to detect two of the 9/11 hijackers in the months before the at-

tacks. As the agency sought to deflect the barrage of criticism, fundamental questions lingered as to whether the bureau will ever be able to fix its seemingly unending technological woes. "What we don't have is an efficient way of working with our information," acknowledged Zalmi Azmi, the bureau's chief information-technology officer. "What I mean by that is that we're still paper based."

That's an especially bitter pill for FBI Director Robert Mueller, who repeatedly promised his agents that they would soon abandon their antiquated data flow and tap into a sophisticated, searchable, electronic case-management system. But after months of negotiating with the contractor, Science Applications International Corp., Mueller pulled the plug on the \$170 million Virtual Case File system in March, at an eventual cost to taxpayers, he said, of \$104 million. The balance of the funds, he told disappointed congressional overseers, was either unspent or used to purchase hardware that could be adapted to future applications. Mueller said the software package as SAIC had designed it failed to meet the bureau's

a budget. FBI officials said the *U.S. News* report on the estimates was wrong. "That number is completely incorrect," Azmi told reporters at a briefing.

U.S. News stands by its original reporting, and Azmi has declined to disclose just how much the replacement system, called Sentinel, will cost. The bureau's critics, meanwhile, responded

sharply to the *U.S. News* reports. "If the costs are anywhere in that range," said Democratic Sen. Patrick Leahy, "it will be the latest in a litany of horrors in the handling of this project." Republican Sen. Charles Grassley said bureau officials "have a heavy burden to

demonstrate the effectiveness of the new system, particularly considering the kind of money they are spending."

The criticism was particularly biting in light of the new Justice Department report, which noted that the FBI's computer problems had contributed to the failure to detect two of the 9/11 hijackers. In response to the report, the bureau released a statement saying that the FBI "has undergone a transformation aimed at strengthening our ability to predict and prevent acts of terrorism." ●

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Zalmi Azmi, FBI