

Commentary: Silent cyberwar

By ARNAUD DE BORCHGRAVE
UPI Editor at Large

The global financial and economic tsunami that threw 50 million people out of work, with another 50 million to follow as plants close the world over, is giving al-Qaida and its Taliban allies a new lease on their safe havens.

WASHINGTON, Feb. 17 (UPI) -- Cyberwarfare is being waged on a massive scale the world over. Ostensibly friendly nations zap each others' electronic nerve cells frequently, and with reckless abandon. On a single day in 2008, the Pentagon was hit by would-be intruders 6 million times in a 24-hour period. Before Sept. 11, 2001, the highest annual figure for cyberattacks against the Pentagon was 250,000.

Speaking not for attribution at a think tank meeting, a Pentagon "cyber warrior" said it felt "like a perpetual hailstorm pelting an imaginary glass envelope around the Defense Department, but there is still no way of telling whether these were attempted intrusions by teenagers testing their hacking skills or the electronic warfare departments of China and Russia, that we know are constantly flexing their electronic muscles."

Multiple congressional computers have been hacked from multiple Chinese locations.

Attackers can still conceal their point of origin by looping or leapfrogging several computer systems in several countries before finally going into the system that is being attacked as well as those pursuing them. Hackers also ensure anonymity by zigzagging through other countries and/or transnational companies with operations all over the world.

The Pentagon cybernaut did not disclose how many, if any, of the 6 million attempted intrusions were successful. Another Pentagon insider, speaking privately, said "an important internal e-mail system was taken down for two days."

Speaking at the same think tank meeting, the chief security officer of a major New York-based financial house said the company had been attacked 1 million times in a 24-hour period. The code of conduct of financial CSOs is to remain silent about successful intrusions. But banks send federal regulators some 600,000 alerts a year about potentially suspicious withdrawals, deposits, transfers and money laundering. Cyberheists have netted billions for cybercrooks.

Estonia in 2007, Georgia in 2008 and Kyrgyzstan in 2009 were targets of massive denial-of-service attacks organized by FAPSI, the Russian Federal Agency for Government Communications and Information, which is the Russian National Security Agency, through a variety of proxies that gave FAPSI plausible deniability. Had Russia paralyzed communications by physical attack, it would be an act of war. The aggressors in a

cyberattack are almost impossible to pin down.

The United States is keeping well ahead of potential adversaries in cyberspace. Last year a U.S. military computer reached the astronomic processing power of more than 1 quadrillion calculations per second. That's 1,000 trillion. To count to 1 quadrillion at the rate of 1 per second would take 32 million years. And if 6 billion people used calculators 24 hours a day, seven days a week, it would take them 46 years to do what Roadrunner covers in a day.

Built by IBM for the U.S. Energy Department's Los Alamos National Laboratory, the \$133 million Roadrunner can test the very first fraction of a second in a nuclear explosion, as well as extrapolate climate change scores of years ahead.

Cyberspace becomes immensely more complex by the day. The global clutter of MySpace, Facebook, ThisNext, YouTube, Wikipedia and Twitter, which fires millions of messages in bursts of 140 characters or less, while 10 hours of video are uploaded to YouTube every minute, or the equivalent of 57,000 full-length movies every week, all contribute to a planetary tower of Babel/Babble and a secure means of communication for terrorists.

Intelligence and security chiefs here and abroad feel that the current global economic and financial crisis is a moment of opportunity for al-Qaida and its affiliates. The wars against terrorists in both Pakistan and Afghanistan are suffering major reverses. Pakistan's civilian government took the world by surprise by suddenly staging and announcing accommodation with its homegrown Taliban in the Swat Valley where government troops are losing ground to the insurgents. In 2006 similar gestures of appeasement were negotiated with the Taliban in the tribal areas on the Afghan border. They collapsed before they could be implemented.

Islamabad conceded Shariah or Islamic law in parts of Swat, in Pakistan proper, where government troops failed to dislodge Taliban fighters. In Kabul, President Hamid Karzai was saying, for the first time, that the war, now under the overall direction of U.S. Gen. David Petraeus, would have to end with a political settlement, geopolitical shorthand for "moderate" elements of the Taliban that are prepared to break with al-Qaida.

No longer the darling of Western capitals, Karzai turned to Russia, and President Dmitry Medvedev wrote back with offers of cooperation on defense. In the game of nations, said political analyst Wahid Muzhda, "Russia is giving Afghanistan the green light, because it wants to show it can ensure the security of the area with no need for the U.S. and NATO."

But Moscow, on the 20th anniversary of its humiliating withdrawal from Afghanistan, also shows every sign of cooperating with the United States in the region, granting transit rights for NATO supplies to replace the route through Pakistan that was closed by Taliban guerrillas.

President Obama's special envoy for Pakistan and Afghanistan, Richard Holbrooke, eased away from the call for total victory against the Taliban and their al-Qaida allies. Obama hinted at the need to engage Iran with a view to enlisting Iran's support in Afghanistan, support that Tehran's mullahs had extended to defeat the Taliban when the United States first invaded Afghanistan on Oct. 7, 2001.

The alternative to a political settlement in Afghanistan is an open-ended commitment to defeating the Taliban and establishing a viable, non-corrupt government in Kabul. That could take another five to 10 years. But NATO's European members and Canada want out by the end of 2011 -- or two more years.

Osama bin Laden and his followers are reinvigorated by the news from almost every part of the planet that a U.S.-induced subprime mortgage crisis has engulfed the world and thrown some 50 million out of work from North America to Europe to the Middle East to Pakistan and India, to Singapore, China, South Korea and Japan. A world jobless figure of 100 million was already being bruited in anti-U.S. editorials from Brussels to Beijing and from Mexico to Malaysia. The magic of Obama has kept a damper on would-be anti-U.S. demonstrations. But since no quick reversal of the global crisis is on anyone's radar, the demos will soon follow.