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Spy chief: Snowden killed 'important' spy program in Afghanistan

By Julian Hattem

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Edward Snowden’s disclosures about American spy powers directly led to the end of a critical program in Afghanistan, the nation’s top spy said on Wednesday.

By forcing the end of the program that recorded practically every cellphone call in the country — as well as scuttling other efforts — Snowden “has done untold damage” to U.S. intelligence, Director of National Intelligence James Clapper said.

“Terrorists, particularly, have gone to school on the revelations caused by Snowden,” Clapper said at the Intelligence and National Security Summit.

“Particularly a program in Afghanistan, which he exposed and Glenn Greenwald wrote about, and the day after he wrote about it, the program was shut down by the government of Afghanistan,” Clapper said.

The spy chief appeared to be referring to a May 2014 story on The Intercept — the online news outlet spearheaded by Greenwald — outlining how the National Security Agency (NSA) was “secretly intercepting, recording and archiving the audio of virtually every cellphone conversation” in two nations.

The Intercept said that the program was taking place in the Bahamas and another country, which it declined to name because of concerns that doing so could lead to violence. The Washington Post reported a similar story based on Snowden’s leaks outlining the depths of the NSA’s phone spying ability in a foreign country, which it also declined to name.

Days later, WikiLeaks publicly identified the country as Afghanistan.

The program “was the single most important source of force protection warning for our people in Afghanistan,” Clapper said on Wednesday.

The program in Afghanistan is one of the few instances in which U.S. intelligence officials have publicly detailed how Snowden’s disclosures led to a specific loss in meaningful intelligence or assisted the country’s opponents.

Snowden has become an object of scorn among much of the intelligence world, where his disclosures are believed to have severely damaged the country’s national security and global reputation.

“On the one hand, it forced some needed transparency, particularly on those programs that affected civil liberties and privacy in this country,” Clapper said on Wednesday.

“But he exposed so many other things that had nothing to do with so-called domestic surveillance or civil liberties and privacy in this country,” he added.

Snowden has sought refuge in Russia for the last two years, where he is avoiding espionage charges in the U.S.