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Secret court to monitor domestic spying program

- Gonzales: Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Court must OK electronic surveillance
- Court has already approved request concerning person with alleged terror links
- Gonzales notified Senate Judiciary Committee leaders in letter issued January 10

WASHINGTON (AP) -- The Justice Department, easing a Bush administration policy, said Wednesday it has decided to give an independent body authority to monitor the government's controversial domestic spying program.

In a letter to the leaders of the Senate Judiciary Committee, Attorney General Alberto Gonzales said this authority has been given to the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Court and that it already has approved one request for monitoring the communications of a person believed to be linked to al Qaeda or an associated terror group.

The court orders approving collection of international communications -- whether it originates in the United States or abroad -- was issued January 10, according to the two-page letter to Sens. Patrick Leahy, D-Vermont, and Arlen Specter, R-Pennsylvania.

"As a result of these orders, any electronic surveillance that was occurring as part of the Terrorist Surveillance Program will now be conducted subject to the approval of the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Court," Gonzales wrote in the letter, a copy of which was obtained by The Associated Press.

"Accordingly, under these circumstances, the President has determined not to reauthorize the Terrorist Surveillance Program when the current authorization expires," the attorney general wrote.

The Bush administration secretly launched the surveillance program in 2001 to monitor international phone calls and e-mails to or from the United States involving people suspected by the government of having terrorist links.

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