

Government targets extremist websites

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The government plans to target extremist websites that 'groom' terrorists as part of its campaign to prevent people being lured into radical groups

The government will target extremist websites that "groom" terrorists, the home secretary, Jacqui Smith, said today, as part of the government's strategy of tackling radical groups.

In her first major speech on terrorism, Smith said there was a consensus on the need to gather information about terrorist suspects; to protect Britain's borders and infrastructure; to prepare for terrorist incidents; and to prevent radicalisation.

"In the case of violent extremism, I have no doubt that stopping people becoming [terrorists] and supporting terrorism is the major long-term challenge we face," the home secretary told a conference held by the International Centre for Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence. Insisting that terrorists are, "first and foremost", criminals, Smith stressed the need to understand the causes and effects of radicalisation.

She said the number of violent extremists in Britain was on the rise, citing the conviction of 42 people for various terrorism activities last year, and the fact that five major terrorism trials were ongoing. Some 2,000 people in the UK were estimated to pose a threat to security last year, up from 1,600 in 2006 she said, adding: "Our current security threat level in this country is 'severe', which means an attack is highly likely."

On the threat from the internet, Smith said the government was already working closely with the communications industry to take action against paedophiles, and planned to target extremist websites in the same way. "Where there is illegal material on the net, I want it removed," she said.

The move comes after details were revealed of an extremist website containing threats against the prime minister and calling for the creation of a "British al-Qaida".

"If we are ready and willing to take action to stop the grooming of vulnerable young [people] on social networking sites, then I believe we

should also take action against those who groom vulnerable people for the purposes of violent extremism," she said.

Smith said studies in Britain and abroad showed the importance of understanding what drew people to violent extremism "either as actors or supporters".

These factors included ideologues who distort history, religion and contemporary politics; young people's vulnerability; communities that are sometimes poorly equipped to challenge violent extremists; and a harbouring of grievances by individuals - "some genuine, some perceived, and some of course directed very specifically against the government".

"Our strategy to deal with radicalisation to violent extremism must therefore focus on each of these factors," she said.

But she warned that the state alone could not tackle the threat. Highlighting extra resources and the move to increase powers to counter terrorism in a forthcoming bill, Smith warned that the state could not combat the problem alone, but also relied on citizens defending the "common good".

"It is a weakness of terrorists as a tactic that the way we respond determines the impact they will have. Whether terrorists succeed is ultimately up to us, not up to them," she said.

"An effective response to terrorism is never dependent solely on the state and solely on law enforcement," she added. "It depends on us. On the active commitment of individuals and communities and to certain rights and responsibilities."

Speaking to the BBC's Radio 4 Today programme before her speech, Smith said there were specific examples of websites that "clearly fall under the category of gratifying terrorism".

"There is growing evidence people may be using the internet both to spread messages and to plan specifically for terrorism," she said.

"That is why, as well as changing the law to make sure we can tackle that, there is more we need to do to show the internet is not a no-go area as far as tackling terrorism is concerned.

Smith said the government planned to work with religious leaders to counter misrepresentations of Islam, and tackling ideologies that might fuel violent extremism.

Next year the government will provide more than £500m to fund security and counter-terrorism measures, rising to nearly £600m over the following two years.