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White House withholding 9/11 files -- report

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NEW YORK (Reuters) - The head of the federal commission investigating the September 11, 2001 attacks says the White House is withholding highly classified intelligence documents and he is ready to subpoena them if they are not released within weeks, according to a report.

Thomas Kean, chairman of the bipartisan National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States, said he also thought the commission would soon be forced to subpoena other executive branch agencies, the New York Times reported in its Sunday edition.

In the interview, which was conducted on Friday, he cited the Bush administration's delay in providing documents and evidence as the reason.

Earlier this month, the commission voted to subpoena the Federal Aviation Administration after it decided the agency withheld documents related to the attacks.

"Any document that has to do with this investigation cannot be beyond our reach," said Kean, the former Republican governor of New Jersey.

It was the first explicit public warning to the White House that it risked subpoena and a possible courtroom battle with the commission over access to the documents, which include Oval Office intelligence reports that preceded the attacks.

The commission has "been very successful in getting a lot of materials that I don't think anybody has ever seen before," he said. "Within the legal constraints that (the White House) seem to have, they've been fully cooperative. But we're not going to be satisfied until we get every document that we need."

The White House did have not any immediate comment on the report.

White House spokeswoman Ashley Snee told the Times the White House believed it was being fully cooperative with the commission and that it hoped to meet all demands for documents.

The commission, created by Congress last year, must complete its work by May 2004, a deadline some members have said might be impossible to meet because of the administration's delays.

The commission is the latest body to complain about access to administration documents.

In August, the General Accounting Office, Congress' investigative arm, said Vice President Dick Cheney stymied its probe into his energy task force by refusing to turn over key documents.

Senator John McCain has said he may subpoena the Pentagon for documents related to an Air Force plan to lease Boeing Co. 767s as refuelling planes. The Arizona Republican said the Defense Department has refused to hand over relevant records.

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