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Spy Chief Says Snowden Took Advantage of 'Perfect Storm' of Security Lapses

By DAVID E. SANGER and ERIC SCHMITT   FEB. 11, 2014

WASHINGTON — The director of national intelligence acknowledged Tuesday that nearly a year after the contractor Edward J. Snowden "scraped" highly classified documents from the National Security Agency's networks, the technology was not yet fully in place to prevent another insider from stealing top-secret data on a similarly large scale.

The director, James R. Clapper Jr., testifying before the Senate Armed Services Committee, said Mr. Snowden had taken advantage of a "perfect storm" of security lapses. He also suggested that as a highly trained systems administrator working for Booz Allen Hamilton, which provides computer services to the agency, Mr. Snowden knew how to evade the protections in place.

"He knew exactly what he was doing," Mr. Clapper said. "And he was pretty skilled at staying below the radar, so what he was doing wasn't visible."

But Mr. Clapper confirmed the outlines of a New York Times report that the former N.S.A. contractor had used a web crawler, a commonly available piece of software, to sweep up a huge trove of documents.

Mr. Clapper also said, for the first time, that some of the information Mr. Snowden is believed to possess could expose the identities of undercover American operatives as well as foreigners who have been recruited by United States spy agencies. The information Mr. Snowden has released so far through several newspapers and a new digital news organization that began publishing on Monday has not revealed the names of agents or operatives, and it is unclear how much of

that information he took with him when he fled the United States. He is now in Russia.

Under questioning, Mr. Clapper made clear that while the N.S.A. has installed security upgrades, not all locations have the software and warning systems that could detect mass downloads of information. He did not address why the agency was not able to detect the web crawler, which indexed and copied all the data in its path.

He said it was likely Mr. Snowden would have been caught if he had been taking the information from inside N.S.A. headquarters at Fort Meade, Md., instead of at an outpost in Hawaii.

"We are going to proliferate deployment of auditing and monitoring capabilities to enhance our insider threat detection," he said. Such systems have already been widely used at some intelligence agencies, including the C.I.A., officials said.

The continuing revelations have posed a particular challenge to Mr. Clapper, a retired Air Force general and longtime intelligence expert, who has made no secret of his dislike for testifying in public. Critics have charged that he deliberately misled Congress and the public last year when asked if the intelligence agencies collected information on domestic communications. He was forced by the Snowden revelations to correct his statements, and he has been somewhat more careful in his testimony.

On Tuesday, for example, he warned that "there are no mousetraps that we could say that we can guarantee that we'll never have another Edward Snowden."

"Our whole system is based on personal trust," he continued.

Over the long term, Mr. Clapper said, all 16 of the nation's intelligence agencies will put a complex system in place that is intended to tag every piece of information in their databases, and then tag who accesses it. That would allow a kind of real-time monitoring missing when Mr. Snowden was freely moving through the N.S.A. system.

The agency has imposed other rules intended to sharply restrict the sharing and downloading of top-secret material.

First is a "two-man rule" — based on the model of how nuclear weapons are handled — that requires two computer systems administrators to work

simultaneously when they are inside systems that contain highly classified material.

At Tuesday's hearing, Mr. Clapper and Lt. Gen. Michael T. Flynn, the director of the Defense Intelligence Agency, also disclosed that American analysts believe that Iran will be ready to test an intercontinental ballistic missile by next year, a crucial milestone in the country's military program. It will still be an undetermined amount of time before Iran will be able to perfect the important next step of designing and miniaturizing a nuclear weapon to fit atop a long-range missile, Mr. Clapper said.

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