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10/29/2001 - Updated 10:39 AM ET

High-tech arsenal deployed in terrorist hunt

WASHINGTON (AP) — The government's pursuit of terrorists is relying heavily on sophisticated technology, from software that automatically translates foreign communications on the Internet to a device that secretly captures every keystroke a suspect makes on his computer. President Bush signed new anti-terrorism legislation Friday that enabled law enforcement to rely on these tools more freely, and the Justice Department immediately sent instructions to prosecutors. "A new era in America's fight against terrorism ... is about to begin," Attorney General John Ashcroft pledged.

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Over the weekend, top Justice lawyers in Washington e-mailed the most cyber-savvy federal prosecutors around the country, describing in more than 30 printed pages how they can use the government's high-tech tools in new ways.

The e-mail, reviewed by the Associated Press, outlines new guidelines, for example, for operating the FBI's Internet surveillance system — formerly known as Carnivore — which capture suspects' e-mails in ways that require only perfunctory approval by a judge.

Another section says that, in rare cases, police can now secretly search a person's house without telling the homeowner for up to three months.

During one of these so-called "sneak and peek" searches, authorities would secretly implant a hidden "key-logger" device. The FBI acknowledged making five such secret searches before it installed its snooping device in a recent gambling investigation.

The key-logger, hidden inside a computer, secretly records everything a suspect types on it. The device lets authorities capture passwords to unscramble data files in otherwise-unbreakable codes.

Bush said this weekend that new anti-terrorism laws were needed because modern terrorists "operate by highly sophisticated methods and technologies." The U.S. government has its own share of gee-whiz gadgetry — enough for a season of *Mission: Impossible*.

The CIA is rushing to teach its computers how to better translate Arabic under a young program it calls "Fluent." Custom-written software scours foreign Web sites and displays information in English back to analysts. The program already understands at least nine languages, including Russian, French and Japanese.

Another CIA breakthrough is "Oasis," technology that listens to worldwide television and radio broadcasts and transcribes detailed reports for analysts.

Oasis currently misinterprets about one in every five words and has difficulty recognizing colloquial Arabic, but the system is improving, said Larry Fairchild, head of the CIA's year-old Office of Advanced Information Technology.

In a demonstration earlier this year at CIA headquarters, Fairchild showed early plans for CIA Live!, which lets CIA experts send instant messages and collaborate on reports and maps across the agency's ultra-secure computer networks.

The FBI and police in Boston and Miami, Fla., are using powerful software called dTective from Ocean Systems of Burtonsville, Md., to trace financial transactions linked to last month's terrorist attacks against New York and Washington.

The software, which runs on highly specialized, $25,000 equipment from Avid Technology, dramatically improves grainy video from surveillance cameras at banks or automated teller machines. It can enhance images, for example, that were nearly unusable because of bad lighting.

"Sometimes we're amazed at the quality of the image," said Dorothy Stout, a top specialist at Veridian in Oakton, Va., who teaches police how to use the video system. Other tools help her rebuild videotapes that have been burned, cut into pieces or thrown into a lake. "It's quite time-consuming," she said.

At U.S. computer-crime labs, including a cutting-edge Defense Department facility near Baltimore, technicians rebuild smashed disk drives from computers.

They also use sophisticated commercial software, called Encase, which can recover deleted computer files and search for incriminating documents on a seized computer.

Experts are hard at work in the FBI's headquarters, using Encase and other tools to examine computers seized after the Sept. 11 attacks.

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