

Civil liberties: Outrage at New York police plan to track vehicles

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The Big Apple is turning into Big Brother, civil liberties groups have warned in response to a new plan from New York city's police chiefs to photograph every vehicle entering Manhattan and hold the details on a massive database.

New York's police commissioner, Raymond Kelly, has proposed a major extension of security measures around the city designed to prevent a third attack on the World Trade Centre as the rebuilding of Ground Zero gathers pace.

As well as placing cameras at all tunnels and bridges into Manhattan, the 36-page plan, called Operation Sentinel, calls for a security ring to be erected at Ground Zero and for a 50-mile buffer zone around the city within which mobile units would search for nuclear or "dirty" bombs.

The proposals are partly based on the so-called ring of steel erected around the City of London in the wake of IRA bombings in the 1990s. Though the 3,000 cameras that could be mounted as a result of the plans of the New York police pale in comparison with the multitude of cameras in operation on the UK's roads and in public places, the proposals have provoked outrage in the United States, where the concept of video surveillance is relatively unfamiliar .

Donna Lieberman, director of the New York Civil Liberties Union, said the idea of tracking the movements of millions of people was "an assault on the country's historical respect for the right to privacy and the freedom to be left alone". The NYCLU is pressing the New York police to release further details of its intentions under freedom of information laws.

The toughest element of the scheme relates to preparations to secure Ground Zero once the six-hectare site is rebuilt and open to the public again. The mammoth construction project has been beset with delays that have pushed back completion beyond 2011, but the New York police want to get security measures operating well in advance.

Those measures include moveable roadblocks, security cameras across lower Manhattan and an underground bomb-screening centre through which all delivery vehicles would have to pass. In the wider 50-mile zone spanning New Jersey, Connecticut, Pennsylvania and Long Island, officers would be equipped with mobile detectors to intercept possible radioactive devices.

The plan to video the number plates of every vehicle would be applied to all points of entry into Manhattan, including the main Brooklyn-Battery, Holland, Lincoln and Midtown tunnels and Brooklyn, Manhattan and other bridges. Details would be kept on computer for a month.

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