

Initial raid defended by ATF official

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Agency believed blood bath near

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Houston Chronicle

WACO — A senior federal official on Monday defended his agency's raid on the Branch Davidian religious sect by saying that undercover agents believed cult members would either attack Waco residents or kill themselves in a mass suicide if action is not taken soon.

But the plans went awry, authorities said, when a phone tip warning of the raid came in the middle of a Sunday morning religious service at the cult's compound.

The phone tip "obviously changed the chemistry, and they had to decide what to do," said Jack Killorin, spokesman for the U.S. Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms in Washington.

A senior official who asked not to be named said the timing of the raid "was a (coin) flip (over whether) they would attack the citizens of Waco or do a Jonestown." He was referring to the mass suicide in 1978 led by the Rev. Jim Jones.

"We understood either they were going to come out or commit self-immolation, which was why an operation was staged that placed our agents between a rock and a hard place," the official said. "Our information was that was how bad it was."

The raid Sunday morning on the compound east of Waco where the Branch Davidian sect was holed up ended in the deaths of four Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms agents.

On Monday, questions were raised by reporters and people in the community near the Mount Carmel com-

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mune about the handling of the raid.

But the senior law-enforcement official contended action was needed immediately and that a phone tip to the compound foiled the plans.

"We had undercover agents in there, the message is apocalyptic, the Armageddon is coming, and you know, it's going to be us, the chosen people against the infidels, the unbelievers. That message is, I think, unnerving in any circumstance. It is particularly unnerving with people who are actually engaged in ordering weapons, in manufacturing machine guns and explosive devices. How far down the road do you let that go? Not very far."

At a news conference in Waco, ATF spokeswoman Sharon Wheeler told reporters that the raid had been planned and rehearsed for months. "The problem we had is we were outgunned. They had bigger firearms than we had," Wheeler said.

Killorin said: "We had sufficient people to get the job done, and again, we had sufficient people in place and planned to move them in based on the longtime observation of their routine and the observation of the premises. I think we lost the element of surprise."

Killorin said undercover "persons in the compound" — he wouldn't say how many — were at the sect's religious services Sunday morning when "a call was received and a subsequent announcement" was made.

"Ostensibly, the announcement was words to the effect that ATF and the National Guard was on the way. The announcement was made by (cult leader Vernon) Howell."

Howell changed his name to David

Koresh two years ago.

Killorin then said an agent in the compound got out before the raid began. "The operation was coordinated to coincide with the breakup of morning Sunday services at the compound."

While ATF officials may consider their strategy in mounting the raid to be basically sound, citizens in the area familiar with the members of the Davidian sect are not so convinced.

Trudy Cry of Axtell, a community near the religious compound, said federal agents' actions were shocking.

"If they (the federal authorities) had just come out and talked to people, I think they would have been better prepared," Cry said.

"Didn't they know they (the Davidians) were powerful?" said her friend, Diana Robb.

Cult leader David Koresh "wasn't going to give up to nobody," said Dana Harris, who lives in the area. And he "looked like the type of guy that would persuade you if you gave him time to persuade you."

Former McLennan County District Attorney Vic Feazell, who unsuccessfully prosecuted seven Branch Davidian members for attempted murder in 1988, accused the ATF of using "storm-trooper" tactics.

Feazell, himself the target of a federal probe six years ago and later acquitted of racketeering charges, also predicted a grim end to the stand-off.

"The feds are preparing to kill them," he said, noting the mobilization of military equipment into nearby staging areas. "That way they can bury their mistakes. And they won't have attorneys looking over what they did later at a trial."

Chronicle reporter Roy Bragg contributed to this story.