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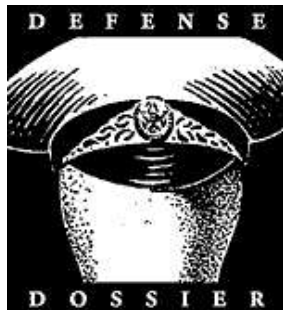

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Thursday, Jun. 20, 2002. Page 9

## Dirty Bomb Threat Is Real

By Pavel Felgenhauer



Last week, while in Moscow, U.S. Attorney General John Ashcroft announced that U.S. security services succeeded in foiling an attempt by al-Qaida terrorists to detonate a "dirty" radioactive bomb in Washington. Later it emerged that the U.S. authorities had only arrested a suspect and had not seized any radioactive materials.

The story may turn out to be a false alarm. It also may be that the radioactive material to make a dirty bomb is already stashed away somewhere in the United States waiting to be used.

Since Sept. 11, the U.S. authorities have been scrambling to deploy radioactivity detecting devices at all ports, passenger and freight border crossings, etc. But establishing a reliable network of detectors to control all possible illicit transport of radioactive materials throughout the United States is a serious challenge. It will take years, billions of dollars and still may not be fully effective.

Plutonium and MOX-fuel -- a mixture of uranium and plutonium oxide, used as fuel in nuclear power plants -- emit heavy particles that can be stopped by a sheet of paper. It's easy to make a dirty bomb using plutonium or MOX-fuel powder. Makers should be relatively safe, if they use a respirator, wash before eating and bury their contaminated clothing.

Plutonium is not easy to detect during transportation and is virtually harmless if not ingested. But even minute amounts of plutonium powder are totally deadly when inhaled or swallowed.

Most scientists agree there is no such thing as a "safe" dose of radioactive exposure, especially if relatively long-living isotopes like plutonium or cesium penetrate and lodge in body tissues. The higher the dose, the higher the risk of sickness or death. But there is no lower limit at which the risk is zero. Some individuals are more resistant than others.

It does not take large clouds of radioactivity to disrupt the life of a big city permanently and cause evacuation of the contaminated area for an indefinite period.

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It is possible, at least in theory, to get hold of the material to make a dirty bomb inside the United States. Over half a century of nuclear production in the United States has produced thousands of tons of highly radioactive waste. Not all of it is adequately stored or fully accounted for. Former Soviet republics may also be a source of radioactive danger. Efforts have been made to try to guard weapons-grade nuclear material in Russia, but radioactive waste is often dumped and not guarded at all.

In Chechnya, a Soviet-era nuclear burial ground of the Moscow-based state-run Radon company has been in the middle of the protracted war, and for years it was not controlled by anyone. It is believed some radioactive substances were removed by Chechen militants, but no one knows for sure how much, since accurate logs are absent and no one is keen to volunteer to dig up the radioactive burial ground to see what's missing.

Russian-Iranian nuclear cooperation is another source of concern. Russian diplomats say Washington has recently been ratcheting up pressure on Moscow to sever links with Iran.

Russia is building a 1,000-megawatt nuclear reactor in Iran that will produce non-weapons-grade plutonium. But it will produce unlimited quantities of radioactive waste, plutonium good for dirty bombs and other dangerous radioactive compounds -- sufficient to load onto ballistic missiles targeted at Israel instead of the nukes that Iran does not have; or maybe provide terrorists with radioactive powder to add to suicide bombs instead of nails.

In a year or two the Iranian reactor will be operational, and the United States seems ready to prevent this at all costs. At present, U.S. diplomats say they are offering Moscow different goodies: Pentagon procurement of Russian-made helicopters specifically modified to fly in the mountains of Afghanistan, NASA buying more Russian-made space equipment, and so on.

But Moscow is resisting the mounting pressure and offers of compensation. Opaque barter deals with Iran often bring much more personal wealth to specific influential individuals in Russia than do contracts with the U.S. government.

The Iranian nuclear connection is increasingly the main stumbling block in U.S.-Russian relations.

If no compromise is found in the coming months, the United States may use its new strategy of preventive nonproliferation and hit the Russian-built reactor, even if Russian technicians are still there.

*Pavel Felgenhauer is an independent defense analyst.*

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