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Thursday, Oct 31, 2002

News

Posted on Tue, Jun. 11, 2002



Hodges worried about plutonium

NICHOLE MONROE BELL
Staff Writer

The decision to house a man accused of being a terrorist at a Charleston naval facility has sparked a debate among some South Carolina leaders who question whether this is safe.

U.S. government officials announced Monday that Abdullah al Muhajir, a 31-year-old American citizen who formerly was named Jose Padilla, was being held at the Naval Consolidation Brig in Charleston.

Muhajir is accused of conspiring with al-Qaida terrorists to build and detonate a radioactive "dirty" bomb in the United States.

A dirty bomb is a device that uses conventional explosives to disperse radioactive material. A dirty bomb, unlike a nuclear weapon, has no atomic chain reaction and does not require highly enriched uranium or plutonium, which are difficult to obtain.

Gov. Jim Hodges, who has been fighting to stop the federal government from shipping plutonium to the Savannah River Site near Aiken, said he was concerned about the announcement. The site is about 130 miles northwest of Charleston and 160 miles southwest of Charlotte.

"If terrorists are trying to build a dirty bomb in the United States, the last thing we should do is truck weapons-grade plutonium across the country in 18-wheelers to a new storage site," Hodges said. "Today's announcement shows that this plutonium is coveted by al-Qaida terrorists."

The Naval Consolidation Brig, which accepted its first prisoners in 1990, houses members of the U.S. military who are serving sentences of up to seven years, Naval Weapons Station Senior Chief Scott Bassett said.

The medium-security prison has 400 cells and typically has a population of about 275 male inmates, Bassett said. Inmates from all branches of the military are housed there. The brig is at the Naval Weapons Station on the Cooper River, upriver from downtown Charleston.

U.S. Rep. Lindsey Graham, R-S.C., said Monday that he doesn't think Muhajir's detainment in Charleston poses a risk.

"In the war on terrorism, every community and state should contribute in a meaningful way," he said. "The Bush administration has determined the Charleston brig can be beneficial to the war effort." -- THE ASSOCIATED PRESS CONTRIBUTED TO THIS REPORT.

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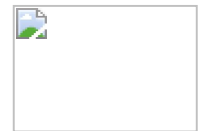
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