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Imagining a 'Dirty Bomb'; From the Mall to Downtown, Tears, Fears and Fatalism

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The make-believe scenario imagined a clear day, no threat of rain, a light breeze blowing. Buses would jockey for parking along the Mall. Inside one of those buses would sit a bomb packed with radiological material. The explosion would rock the Smithsonian Institution's Air and Space Museum.

"Why a museum?" asked Michelle Smith, who works in the Smithsonian's publications department, two buildings from the Air and Space Museum on Jefferson Drive. "It's one thing if you work at the Pentagon -- I can see that maybe you might expect some risk to go along with working there. But here?"

The "here" she was talking about is the heart of Washington, the place routinely mentioned this week as a potential target for a "dirty bomb," the latest entry into the nation's post-Sept. 11 lexicon.

A couple of hypothetical dirty-bomb scenarios had been drafted by scientists and security experts in the months after the Sept. 11 attacks, but the scenarios didn't generate much street-corner chatter. Monday's announcement of a foiled dirty-bomb plot, however, got many of those who live and work in the conjectural cross hairs talking -- and worrying.

"Since I work right here, people in the office started doing calculations," Smith said, "trying to figure out the areas that would be affected."

According to a scenario that the Center for Strategic and International Studies created for the Metropolitan Washington Council of Governments, the immediate impact of a dirty bomb exploding in front of the Air and Space Museum likely would be little more than that of a conventional bomb. The radioactive material spread through the air could spur more panic than medical harm, the report said.

Caroline Newman, an editor for the Smithsonian Institution Press, said she and her co-workers had heard about the studies and knew that the predictions indicated the radiological risk would be slight. But the announcement of a

previously unknown terrorist plot -- even though it had apparently been thwarted -- hit a nerve.

"I heard about it when someone walked into my office crying," said Newman. "She was surprised at how distraught she was. She said that it was amazing how close to the surface all of those feelings had been, and she didn't even know it."

On K Street downtown, co-workers Jen Grant and Chris Birks said they had been hardened by repeated warnings of possible terrorist activity since Sept. 11. Their fear, they said, had been replaced by fatalism.

"Anything could happen," said Grant, who works for an Internet design firm. "Fumes could come out of the sidewalk and kill us all."

"This manhole cover could explode," Birks added.

"It just seems that there's not much we can do about it," Grant said. "You've got to live the way you live. You shouldn't change your lifestyle because of something like this."

It was an oft-repeated ideal among District residents and workers yesterday, but not one that everyone was following. George Atkinson, vice president of a Texas company that sells potassium iodide anti-radiation pills, said about 200 people placed orders after Monday's announcement. "A great majority," he said, were from the Washington area, New York and New Jersey.

Unfortunately, the pills probably wouldn't do much good in a dirty-bomb attack, said Michael Levi, director of the Federation of American Scientists' Strategic Security Project. Most dirty-bomb studies predict a device packed with non-iodine radiation, he said.

Levi helped write a scenario in which a dirty bomb explodes near the U.S. Capitol. The study suggested that after such a blast, about one in 100 people in the area less than a half-block from the source would die of cancer. That assumes that the area would not be cleaned up and that the people would remain exposed to the radiation for 30 to 40 years.

"I'm not scared of the direct health threat, but if people around me are panicking, then the effects of that will be very real to me," Levi said.

Richard Wiggins, who works downtown for Budget Rent a Car Corp., said he plans to learn more about dirty bombs in the next few days and determine what he should do in case of an attack.

"I don't want to be one of those people who's going to panic," Wiggins said.

Levi said if such an explosion were to occur, residents should stay inside, close their windows and ventilation systems and monitor the television and radio.

"We can do a lot by being prepared and by having a proper response plan," he said. ". . . People shouldn't be so worried about their own health" but instead about the possibility of others overreacting to such an explosion.

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