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AFRICA

Nuclear rod goes missing from the DRC

Washington

04 July 2002 09:18

A nuclear fuel rod used at a research reactor in the Democratic Republic of Congo is missing and the possibility that it's in the hands of terrorists has not been ruled out, a report said on Wednesday.

According to the US government-funded *Voice of America* radio, International Atomic Energy Agency officials first raised concerns about the missing rod in 1998, when it was reported another rod disappeared from the facility at the University of Kinshasa. That rod was later recovered from criminals in Italy.

A missing second rod had not been previously reported.

A representative for the IAEA confirmed the fuel rod is missing, but it could not be used to build a nuclear device.

"Although the whereabouts of that single fuel element are not known, we would say that one element would be of essentially no use in constructing a nuclear device (or) nuclear explosive device," Mark Gwozdecky told VOA. "And it would also be a poor choice for constructing a radiological or so-called dirty bomb."

The rod was made by the US firm General Atomics, which said it was considered low-enriched, ranging between 19,7 and 19,9% of fissionable Uranium. The benchmark for highly enriched Uranium is 20%.

It remained unclear how the rod disappeared from the facility in the western part of the country. Visitors have said security at the site is minimal.

Citing industry sources, the radio station reported the reactor poses a potential hazard. The IAEA representative said technical teams have been sent to Kinshasa to ensure it operates safely. - Sapa-DPA

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