

World

This image provided by the Slovak police today shows police experts holding open one of two shells containing 481.4 grams of enriched uranium powder seized by Slovak police in east Slovakia on Wednesday.

AP



Nov. 29, 2007, 4:18PM

Arrests give glimpse at nuclear black market

WILLIAM J. KOLE
Associated Press

BRATISLAVA, Slovakia — The arrests of three men who allegedly tried to sell contraband uranium for \$1 million show how a shadowy black market for nuclear components has survived despite tightened security at nuclear facilities worldwide, experts said today.

Slovak police said the material, believed to have originated in the former Soviet Union, was highly dangerous and could have been used in a radiological "dirty bomb" or other terrorist weapon.

U.N. and independent experts suggested the uranium may not have been anywhere near that lethal. But officials tracking the illicit global trade in radioactive materials said the arrests underscored the risk of nuclear substances falling into terrorist hands.

Should that happen, "the consequences would be so catastrophic, the world would be a different place the next day," said Richard Hoskins, who supervises a database of stolen, missing, smuggled or unauthorized radioactive materials for the International Atomic Energy Agency.

In 2006 alone, the U.N. nuclear watchdog registered 252 reported cases — a 385 percent increase since 2002.

Hoskins cautioned that the spike probably was due at least in part to better reporting and improved law enforcement efforts. Of the 252 cases, about 85 involved thefts or losses, and not all the material was suitable for use in a weapon, he told The Associated Press.

But small amounts can add up, and this week's arrests heightened long-standing concerns that Eastern Europe is serving as a source of radioactive material for terrorists and criminals.

The suspects, two Hungarians and a Ukrainian who were arrested Wednesday in eastern Slovakia and Hungary, were trying to sell about a pound of uranium in powder form, said First Police Vice President Michal Kopcik.

"It was possible to use it in various ways for terrorist attacks," he said.

Kopcik said investigators believed the uranium was suitable for a "dirty bomb," which would use conventional explosives to spread radioactive material across an urban area.

He said the uranium had been stashed in lead containers, and that investigators determined it contained 98.6 percent uranium-235. Uranium is considered weapons-grade if it contains at least 85 percent uranium-235.

But nuclear experts who were shown police photographs of radioactivity readings contended the material was probably not as dangerous as authorities believe.

They said the police confused a scientific reading of the material as dealing with its "concentration" of uranium-235, when in fact it was just a "confidence" level of the machine to give an accurate reading. They suggested it may even have been natural uranium — a common and non-lethal element.

"Uranium is not very radiotoxic," said David Albright, a former U.N. weapons inspector who is now president of the Institute for Science and International Security in Washington.

"The net effect of dispersing half a kilo (about a pound) of uranium — who cares? Each person would get so little it would have no effect," Albright said.

Alexander Glaser, a researcher at Princeton University's Program in Science and Global Security, said any discussion of dirty bombs in this case was "off topic."

"Even naturally occurring uranium would be more effective than this in making a dirty bomb," he said.

Investigators were still working to determine who ultimately was trying to buy the uranium, which the three men allegedly were selling for \$1 million.

Experts say roughly 55 pounds of highly enriched uranium or plutonium is needed in most instances to fashion a crude nuclear device. But they say a fraction of that is enough for a dirty bomb — a weapon whose main purpose would be to create fear and chaos, not cause human casualties.

Vitaly Fedchenko, a researcher with the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, said people should not get the idea that the world is awash in easily obtainable bomb components.

"The danger is definitely there. But there's no reason to panic," he said. "Most of the 'buyers' out there are law enforcement agents. And not all of the materials out there are weapons grade."

In 2003, police in the Czech Republic, which borders Slovakia, arrested two Slovaks in a sting operation in the city of Brno after they allegedly sold undercover officers natural depleted uranium for \$715,000.

Concerns about nuclear smuggling have generally been focused on Russia and countries of the former Soviet Union, where security at nuclear-related industries deteriorated after the 1991 Soviet collapse.

The U.S.-based Nuclear Threat Initiative, an organization dedicated to reducing the global threat from nuclear weapons, said in a report last year that Russia remains the prime country of concern for contraband nuclear material.

In 2006, Georgian agents working with CIA officials set up a sting that led to the arrest of a Russian citizen who tried to sell a small amount of weapons-grade uranium that he had in a plastic bag in his jacket pocket.

In 1997, seven men who officials said planned to smuggle 11 pounds of enriched uranium to Pakistan or China were arrested in Novosibirsk, Russia. That uranium reportedly had been stolen from a plant in the former Soviet republic of Kazakhstan.

Associated Press Writers Karel Janicek in Bratislava, Lily Hindy in New York and Raphael G. Satter in London contributed to this report.

COMMENTS

Readers are solely responsible for the content of the comments they post here. Comments are subject to the site's [terms and conditions](#) of use and do not necessarily reflect the opinion or approval of the Houston Chronicle.

You must be logged in to leave a comment. [Login](#) | [Register](#)

Submit

Most recent comments



Rorschach wrote:

Plasmopal, from what I hear she prefers panties on her sex partners:

<http://redinktexas.blogspot.com/2007/11/speaking-of-strange-bedfellows.html>

11/29/2007 5:05 PM CST

[Recommend](#)

[Report abuse](#)



plasmopal wrote:

Chas - they should have asked her "boxers or briefs" instead.

11/29/2007 4:56 PM CST

[Recommend](#)

[Report abuse](#)



ChasB wrote:

"Diamonds or pearls" CNN asked her. Maybe, they should have asked, "LA or Houston?" instead.

11/29/2007 3:44 PM CST

[Recommend](#)

[Report abuse](#)



45ACP wrote:

My mistake. Sorry. Just trying to help. . .

11/29/2007 3:28 PM CST

[Recommend](#)

[Report abuse](#)

[Read all comments \(41\)](#) ▶



ADVERTISING: [Contests](#) | [Fraudulent Ads](#) | [Information & Rates](#) | [Place An Ad](#) | [Singles In Houston](#) | [Yellow Pages](#) | [CHRONLINKS](#)

CHRONICLE: [Subscribe Now](#) | [Subscriber Services](#) | [Buy Photos & Page Prints 2005-Present](#) | [Historic Page Prints 1901-2004](#) | [Chronicle in Education](#) | [Public Affairs](#) | [Corrections](#) | [RSS Feeds](#)  [RSS](#)

SERVICES: [Privacy Policy](#) | [Terms & Conditions](#) | [Help](#) | [Registration](#) | [Report a Problem](#) | [Site Map](#) | [News Alerts](#) | [Newsletters](#)



HEARST *newspapers*