

Capital Region practices for "dirty bomb" scenario

By [ROBERT GAVIN](#), Staff writer

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COLONIE - Imagine a "dirty bomb" exploding in downtown Albany.

Now envision two going off only blocks apart.

That very possibility was simulated Tuesday as hundreds of federal, state and local law enforcement officials manned would-be command posts on Albany-Shaker Road to prepare for the potentially catastrophic event.

The mock reaction, part of a three-day exercise called "Empire 09," was staged around a hockey facility near Albany International Airport. It featured radiation screenings, officials in white "space suit"-type outfits and aircraft to surveil contaminated areas from the sky.

The exercise, hosted by the New York State Disaster Preparedness Commission, was sponsored by the U.S. Department of Energy. It comes only weeks after the FBI arrested four alleged conspirators in a plot to blow up two synagogues in the Bronx and shoot down military planes at Stewart Airforce Base in Newburgh.

"Our enemies are patient and they are ruthless," said Mary Kavaney, assistant secretary for public safety in Gov. David Paterson. "We can't let our guard down and this exercise shows we will not let our guard down."

The "attack" showed the aftermath of two radioactive dirty bombs going off during the workday - one at Eagle and State streets, the other at Eagle and Madison Avenue. Projected maps show evacuations, from mandatory to voluntary, would stretch from a wide range of downtown Albany across the Hudson River to the city of Rensselaer.

Dirty bombs, which combine radioactive materials with conventional explosives, should not be confused with the nuclear variety, said Dennis Michalski, spokesman for the state Emergency Management Office.

The two blasts in Albany would take an estimated six lives at the least, but also wreak untold havoc to the surrounding environment, officials said.

Among other drills, workers using laptop computers filled the inside of the county's hockey arena. Officials also allowed the media to not only inspect the various command posts, but wear necessary protective clothing.

Joseph Krol, associate administrator for the U.S. Department of Energy's National Nuclear Security Administration, said such drills are valuable, in part, to see what mistakes are made "so when the real thing happens, we will really be prepared."

Robert Gavin can be reached at 434-2403 or rgavin@timesunion.com

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