



Dirty Bomb Concerns Remain; Security Gaps Still Exist

US Lacks Long-Term Plan for Nuclear Detection, Says GAO

By MADDY SAUER

July 16, 2008—

The United States still does not have a long-term strategic plan to provide detection of radiological and nuclear materials that may be smuggled into the country, according to a preliminary report to be released today by the Government Accountability Office.

The report also highlights gaps in the country's current nuclear detection strategy such as vulnerabilities at land border crossings between formal points of entry, small maritime vessels, and international aviation. And there is still the ever-looming problem of the effectiveness of both the current and proposed radiation detection technology.

These issues will be addressed at a hearing today before the Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs. David Maurer, a director at the GAO, will be testifying about the preliminary findings.

The GAO report examined the work of the Domestic Nuclear Detection Office (DNDO), which was established three years ago to enhance and coordinate US efforts to prevent radiological and nuclear attacks.

While the GAO commended the DNDO's initial efforts, the preliminary report concludes that the office "lacks an overarching strategic plan" that would define "how DNDO would achieve and monitor its goal of detecting the movement of radiological and nuclear materials through potential smuggling routes".

The gaps in the nation's current border detection have been well-documented. In 2006, federal investigators were able to smuggle enough cesium-137 into the country to create two dirty bombs.

In 2002, and again in 2003, ABC News was able to ship 15 pounds of depleted uranium into the country without any detection.

The DNDO is working to address the gaps at the country's land and maritime points of

entry. One ongoing study focuses on equipping border control agents with portable radiological nuclear detection equipment, according to Maurer.

With or without new technology, much of the responsibility to detect nuclear smugglers actually rests with the border inspectors themselves. In a 2006 government test, radiation detection alarms actually went off, but the undercover investigators used counterfeit documents, which said they were licensed to carry the material, to successfully get the material past inspectors and into the country.

Even when border inspectors are diligent, current detection technology has its limitations. Current radiation portal monitors, according to Maurer's prepared testimony, "cannot distinguish between harmless radiological materials, such as ceramic tiles, fertilizer, and bananas, and dangerous nuclear materials, such as plutonium and uranium".

Tests are currently being conducted on a newer version of the portal monitors, which cost seven times what the current models cost, but questions still loom over the effectiveness of the technology. The GAO previously questioned whether or not the devices were worth their price tag of \$360,000 each after concluding they were at best 45 percent accurate, and sometimes as low as 17 percent accurate.

"We have raised continuing concerns about DNDO's efforts to develop and test these advanced portal monitors," said Maurer's statement, though he adds that 'most known interdictions of weapons-useable nuclear material have resulted from police investigations rather than by radiation detection equipment".

The DNDO had a budget of \$2.8 billion last year, but Maurer says that will not be enough to sustain a long term plan. He points out that last year's budget did not include the costs of acquiring and deploying the advanced radiation portal monitors that are currently being tested.

The DNDO has not commented on the report to ABC News, but the GAO says that the office concurred with the recommendation of the preliminary report.

[Click Here for the Investigative Homepage.](#)

Copyright © 2008 ABC News Internet Ventures