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## Report: Government lags in securing radioactive material

**The Associated Press**

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**WASHINGTON:** Nearly seven years after the Sept. 11 attacks, the government says it is doing better at securing nuclear and radiological materials. Not good enough, congressional investigators say.

A report Monday faulted the Bush administration for taking too long to ensure such materials do not fall into terrorists' hands. The Nuclear Regulatory Commission says the safeguards are much improved since 2001.

Radioactive material used for legitimate purposes in medical equipment and food processing could be used to create an explosive device known as a dirty bomb. Experts believe such an attack would be contained to a small area. But it could have a significant psychological impact and serious economic consequences because of cleanup problems.

The Government Accountability Office said requirements to ensure that someone has a legitimate reason to buy or carry radioactive materials are more than three years behind schedule.

In a probe last year, investigators said they set up a bogus company and obtained a license from the NRC that allowed them to buy enough radioactive material for a small dirty bomb. Officials hope the licensing requirements will prevent this from happening again.

A system to track radioactive materials as they are transported across the country has faced multiple delays. The NRC says the system should be in place at year's end, but it will not be a real-time tracking system, such as used by some package delivery services.

The system will report transfers within one business day, said NRC spokesman Neil Sheehan. If material goes missing while it is transported, an alarm system will notify officials, he said.

On the inspection side, government investigators found that most Customs and Border Protection officers were not told of 2006 radioactive material reporting requirements by the agency's Washington headquarters. In May 2006, the agency changed its policy to require that officers contact authorities if they detect "more than incidental" amounts of radiation. But this was never communicated to officials in the field.

The GAO also found a lack of personal radiation detection equipment for Customs officials at land borders. In 2003, 8,000 out of 18,000 officers and agents had personal radiation detection devices. Only about half of the agency's agents and officers now have the equipment because of budget constraints, agency spokesman Lloyd Easterling said.

Getting these radioactive materials secured has been a longtime goal of Sen. Norm Coleman, a Minnesota Republican. Coleman said he is happy there has been some progress, but it is taking too long and it is not enough.

Speaking of the NRC, he said, "I'm still not convinced they fully grasp the psychological and economic impact that even a small dirty bomb attack would have on the American public."

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On the Net:

GAO report: <http://tinyurl.com/5wkeqh>

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