

April 10, 2007

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March 05, 2007 6:59AM

'Dirty bomb' danger very real

OUR OPINION

Radioactive "dirty bombs" are nightmares that haven't come true. But they could.

The raw material to make dirty bombs is abundant. The price is right. And, disturbingly, not nearly enough is being done to keep potential bomb components out of the hands of terrorists. We hope that with increased awareness that will change.

A story in the Feb. 15 Chicago Tribune by foreign correspondent Alex Rodriguez explained the threat in chilling detail. Dirty bombs use conventional explosives, such as dynamite, to spread radioactive material over a small area, perhaps several city blocks.

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Where would the radioactive material come from? It exists throughout the former Soviet Union republics in abundance, most often in forms not intended for use in weapons. Obtaining it can be as easy as picking it up and walking away with it. Radioactive substances often are kept in unsecured

places.

Much has been accomplished in the continuing effort to dismantle nuclear weapons in the former Soviet republics. Credit is due Sen. Richard Lugar, R-Ind., and former Sen. Sam Nunn, D-Ga., for the Cooperative Threat Reduction Act. It has led to the elimination of more than 6,000 nuclear warheads. Ukraine, Belarus and Kazakhstan are nuclear weapon-free because of the effort.

The dirty bomb threat is a different problem -- but one that needs to be approached with the same determination.

According to the Chicago Tribune report, from 1993 to 2004 there were 662 confirmed cases of radioactive materials smuggling worldwide, more than 400 of them involving materials suitable for use in dirty bombs. And those are just the ones officials know about.

The materials of concern usually are plutonium and uranium waste, strontium-90 and cesium-137. Where are they found? In Russia alone, according to the report, strontium-90 powers more than 600 radioisotope thermoelectric generators, or RTGs. There are RTGs in dozens of lighthouses situated along the Barent Sea -- many of them not protected by so much as a chainlink fence. Each RTG contains enough strontium-90 to make about 40 dirty bombs.

The nation of Kazakhstan has used more than \$20 million provided by the United States to seal up tunnels in which Soviet nuclear weapons tests once were conducted. The concrete seals haven't kept out scrap metal hunters who use homemade explosives to enter the tunnels. Inside, along with iron, are huge quantities of cesium, plutonium, uranium and strontium waste from 458 Cold War-era nuclear tests.

Then, the Chicago Tribune report continues, there are the canisters of cesium-137 that frequently are found at abandoned former Soviet military bases in Georgia.

And let's not forget the physics institute in Abkhazia, with its storehouse of plutonium, uranium and other radioactive substances. It fell into the hands of Abkhaz separatists when they drove the Georgian military out during a 1992 civil war. Georgian authorities don't know what has become of the deadly substances.

So far, the United States has spent \$178 million to provide radiation detection equipment to other countries -- many of them the former Soviet republics. The aim is to prevent smuggling. The republics' governments, by and large, are cooperative with efforts to remove, secure or intercept dangerous materials. But in environments of poverty and corruption, the problem is far from solved.

Meanwhile, here at home, the Government Accountability Office predicts that the Department of Homeland Security will miss by about five years its 2009 deadline to install 3,000 radiation detection units at key U.S. entry points.

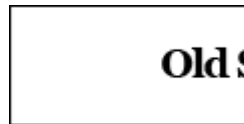
The dirty bomb threat ought to be a very high priority for the United

States and our allies. The goals -- to help other countries clean up radioactive materials, and to keep them out of this country -- are clear.

Dirty bombs are a real, low-tech, highly dangerous threat. Detection equipment at entry points, and a trained, well-equipped reaction force, should be a high priority. We urge our congressional delegation to support legislation to make it so.

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