

Terror groups developing 'dirty bomb', say security chiefs

Islamist terrorists have stepped up their efforts to develop a "dirty" bomb for use against Western targets, senior Western security sources have told The Daily Telegraph.

By Con Coughlin

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They are exploiting the political chaos in Pakistan in a bid to acquire nuclear material for a 'spectacular' attack.

At least one plot has been uncovered involving Pakistani-based terrorists planning to use nuclear material against a major European target.

Osama bin Laden's al-Qa'eda terror group, whose terrorist infrastructure is based in the province of Waziristan in northwest Pakistan, is known to be trying to acquire nuclear technology to use in terror attacks against the West.

Other militant Islamist groups in Pakistan, such as the newly formed Pakistani Taliban, have also shown an interest in developing weapons with a nuclear capability, according to Western security officials.

Security chiefs fear the mounting political instability in Pakistan will make it easier for militant Islamist groups to develop a primitive nuclear device.

Pakistan is the world's only Muslim country with a nuclear weapons arsenal, which was developed during the 1990s by the rogue Pakistani nuclear scientist Dr Abdul Qadir (AQ) Khan.

Dr Khan was placed under house arrest after he was accused of selling the blueprint for Pakistan's atom bomb to rogue states such as Libya, North Korea and Iran. But the restrictions on Dr Khan's detention have been eased since President Pervez Musharraf was forced from power.

Pakistan's nuclear arsenal is subject to stringent security safeguards put in place with the help of the American military when Mr Musharraf was in office. But there is mounting concern within Western security circles that Islamic terror groups will gain access to Pakistan's expertise in developing terrorist weapons containing nuclear material.

"Islamist militant groups want to carry out terror attacks on a massive scale, and there is no better way for them to achieve that objective than to develop some form of primitive nuclear device," said a senior U.S. security official.

The most likely terror device using nuclear material is a "dirty bomb", where conventional explosives are fitted with radioactive material.

Security experts believe the detonation of such a device in a city like London would provoke widespread panic and chaos, even though the area of contamination would be relatively small.

Western security officials say they have uncovered evidence that a Pakistani based group was planning to attack a European target with such a device, although details of the planned attack have not been made public.

The sweeping victory of Asif Ali Zardari, the widower of murdered Pakistani leader Benazir Bhutto, in the presidential election at the weekend, has done little to reassure Western diplomats that the security situation in Pakistan is about

to improve. Mr Zardari was jailed for nine years on corruption charges, and Western diplomats have little confidence in his ability to provide strong leadership.

"Pakistan is in danger of becoming a failed state, and Mr Zardari's election victory is unlikely to improve the situation," said a Western diplomat.

Tensions grew last week when American special forces staged a cross-border incursion from Afghanistan into Pakistan's lawless tribal regions.

They were targeting suspected al-Qaeda operatives, signalling a possible intensification of US efforts to disrupt militant safe havens in Pakistan.

Despite fury in Pakistan, US defence officials have said that the number of cross-border missions might grow in coming months in response to the growing militancy.

But there are fears this could but this could provoke an Islamist backlash throughout Pakistan that could play into the terrorists' hands.

Most of the recent Islamist terror plots against Britain – including the July 7 attacks in London in 2005 – had links with Pakistan, and British security officials say groups based in Pakistan continue to pose the greatest terrorist threat to Britain.

British security officials recently confirmed that they were investigating at least 30 terror plots that originated in Pakistan. "In the past many of the plots have been fairly primitive, but we are seeing a growing level of sophistication. We fear it is only a question of time before the groups based in Pakistan develop some form of nuclear capability."

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