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U.S. Counterterror Chief: "Dirty Bomb" as Much a Risk as Biological Weapon

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WASHINGTON -- A senior U.S. counterterrorism official said yesterday the risk of an attack against the nation using a "dirty bomb" might be as high as that of a potential terror strike involving a biological weapon (see [GSN](#), Feb. 10).



(Feb. 11) - Police officers wearing hazard materials protection suits secure an area during a 2004 exercise simulating a radiological "dirty bomb" strike at the Port of Los Angeles. A dirty-bomb attack against the United States might be as likely as a biological-weapon strike, the head of the U.S. National Counterterrorism Center said yesterday (David McNew/Getty Images).

The danger of al-Qaeda or other terrorists "obtaining a biological weapon is more likely than obtaining or producing a yield-producing nuclear device," said Michael Leiter. He added, though, that in his view, "the likelihood of [their] using a radiological device that doesn't have [a nuclear explosive] yield might be equally high."

A dirty bomb would use conventional explosives to disperse radioactive materials, potentially claiming lives and contaminating an area surrounding the detonation for years. Such a device would be less destructive than a traditional nuclear weapon, but could be much easier for a terrorist to construct and might still have devastating economic and health consequences.

Leiter directs the National Counterterrorism Center, which is responsible for integrating and analyzing nearly all intelligence related to the threat of terror attacks. The NCTC head reports to both the U.S. president and the national intelligence director.

Testifying before the House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence, Leiter said that members of al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula -- based largely in Yemen -- have shown interest in both chemical weapons and biological devices, such as those capable of spreading anthrax or another potentially lethal pathogen.

He said this and other al-Qaeda affiliates' level of intention to obtain biological, chemical or radiological weapons remains "high," particularly in Pakistan and Yemen (see [GSN](#), Feb. 10).

Nonetheless, the prospect of conventional terror strikes looms larger for the United States and its allies than attacks employing a weapon of mass destruction.

"Although there is a huge consequence" involved in any WMD attack, Leiter said, "I do think that the smaller-scale, lone-wolf attack with conventional weapons still stands out as a far more likely event."

A congressionally chartered **commission** in late 2008 concluded that "unless the world community acts decisively and with great urgency, it is more likely than not that a weapon of mass destruction will be used in a terrorist attack somewhere in the world by the end of 2013" (see [GSN](#), Dec. 1, 2008).

Headed by former Senators Bob Graham (D-Fla.) and Jim Talent (R-Mo.), the Commission on the Prevention of WMD Proliferation and Terrorism determined that terrorists could more easily obtain and use a biological weapon than a nuclear bomb.

Central Intelligence Agency Director Leon Panetta said the possibility that terrorists might acquire a nuclear weapon tends to garner the most attention because of the potentially catastrophic scale of such an attack.

"But I have to tell you, from an intelligence point of view, we see more and more that al-Qaeda continues to look at [the] possibility" of employing biological weapons, he said.

The CIA and related U.S. agencies are intent on ensuring that terrorists remain unable to develop such arms, "because in dealing with al-Qaeda, the likelihood is they'll use anything they can in order to create terror," said Panetta, testifying at the same hearing on worldwide threats.

No new intelligence details about this concern were discussed at the event, which was followed by a closed session in which Leiter, Panetta and other top intelligence officials were expected to elaborate on various threats.

However, a recent issue of "Inspire," an al-Qaeda magazine, mentioned continued interest in employing anthrax in a terror strike, officials have said (see [GSN](#), Feb. 4). This latest development comes after several years of reports that elements of the terror organization have discussed and at times experimented with unconventional weapons (see [GSN](#), March 18, 2010).

Also sitting on the same witness panel yesterday was National Intelligence Director James Clapper, who called the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction a "major concern."

"The proliferation threat environment is a fluid, borderless arena that reflects the broader global reality of an increasingly free movement of people, goods and information," he said in a prepared statement. "While this environment is critical for peaceful scientific and economic advances, it also allows the materials, technologies and know-how related to chemical, biological, radiological and nuclear weapons, as well as missile delivery systems, to be shared with ease and speed."

Clapper pointed to Iran as a nation of particular concern, given that its uranium enrichment activities are widely believed to contribute to an effort to develop a nuclear weapon. Tehran insists that the objectives of its nuclear power program are entirely peaceful.

The intelligence director called Iran "increasingly rigid, autocratic, dependent on coercion to maintain control, and defiant towards the West." The Persian Gulf nation "continues to advance its uranium-enrichment capabilities, along with what appears to be the scientific, technical and industrial capacity to produce nuclear weapons if its leaders choose to do so," he said (see related [GSN](#) story, today).

Clapper also briefly mentioned North Korea as "a serious threat, both regionally and beyond" (see related [GSN](#) story, today).

Pyeongyang, he said, "has signaled a willingness to re-engage in dialogue, but it also craves international recognition as a nuclear-weapons power. And it has shown troubling willingness to sell nuclear technologies."

International six-party talks regarding North Korea's nuclear weapons program were indefinitely suspended in April 2009; one month later, Pyongyang conducted its second nuclear test. Military leaders from the Stalinist nation this week met with their counterparts from the South, but the talks stalled when the North Korean brass refused to take responsibility for a suspected torpedo strike on one of Seoul's warships last March or apologize for their November shelling of Yeonpyeong Island (see [GSN](#), Feb. 10).

The North also recently unveiled a new uranium enrichment capability, further stoking concerns about expansion of its fledgling weapon stockpile and about the regime exchanging WMD technologies and expertise with other international rogue actors (see [GSN](#), Nov. 22, 2010).

For his part, FBI Director Robert Mueller warned lawmakers that a failure to reauthorize the Patriot Act could eliminate some vital investigative capabilities needed for fighting terrorism. The House leadership on Tuesday was unable to round up sufficient votes to renew the counterterrorism measure, which could expire on February 28.

One key law enforcement tool authorized by the Patriot Act is the ability to obtain judicial permission for "roving wiretaps," which allow investigators to track a suspect's communications regardless of platform.

A potential terrorist might use multiple computers, cell phones, messaging devices or the like, and the Patriot measure allows each technology to be tapped under the provisions of the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act.

"We do not have to go and get a separate order for each of these communications, but we get what's called a roving wiretap approved by a judge," Mueller said. "That has been used more than 190 times since its inception back in 2001. Again, to lose that would ... undercut our ability to do our work."

Responding to a question from committee Chairman Mike Rogers (R-Mich.), Mueller said that without a Patriot Act extension, it would be easier to track the communications of a drug dealer or child pornographer than those of a terrorist.

"If it was a terrorist, we could not" obtain a court's permission for a roving wiretap, the FBI director said. "If it was a child pornographer, we could."

"So if [it's] a drug dealer, you -- you're fine" in securing a roving wiretap, said Representative C.A. Dutch Ruppersberger (D-Md.). "If you're a terrorist with a radiological bomb, we can't get it."

"We cannot," Mueller said. "That's the point."

The remarks triggered some confusion in the Capitol hearing room, with Representative Adam Schiff (D-Calif.) remarking that it was "a little misleading" to suggest that "you couldn't get a wiretap in a radiological bomb case."

Mueller assured the lawmaker that he did not "in any way attempt to mislead." Rather, the FBI chief said, he had intended to point out that "if the [Patriot] statute was not re-upped, we would lose that in the national security capacity, but we would still have that capability" to tap suspected drug dealers or child pornographers under separate criminal law.