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## **BRIEFING: Pre-empting a 'dirty bomb' threat**

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By John Zarocostas - GENEVA - Security officials warn that terrorists are trying to obtain radioactive materials to construct a "dirty bomb" and have called on countries around the globe to intensify efforts to stem the illicit traffic in nuclear bomb-making materials.

"Since 2001, there have been several attempts to obtain radiological material for use in a 'dirty bomb,'" said William Nye, director of counter-terrorism and intelligence at Britain's Home Office.

He noted that in the investigation codenamed Operation Rhyme, eight terrorists were convicted for planning attacks on buildings in the United Kingdom and the United States. Besides planning to blow up limousines packed with gas cylinders and explosives, the cell's members "were considering using a radioactive bomb," he recently told an international conference in Edinburgh, Scotland, organized by the International Atomic Energy Agency.

A new United Nations report on nuclear terrorism by the Institute for Disarmament Research (UNIDIR) said the most likely nuclear threat is terrorists' building a "dirty bomb," in which an ordinary explosive disperses radioactive materials. These materials are widely used worldwide and often not adequately controlled.

The report said a simulation showed that a dirty-bomb attack in Lower Manhattan would "spread radioactive fallout over sixty blocks. Immediate casualties would be limited to victims of the immediate blast. The aftereffects, including relocation and cleanup, would cost tens of billions of dollars."

Former chief of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) Hans Blix said a dirty would have "a terror effect" and noted that such weapons can be constructed using materials such as cobalt and cesium, which are available for use in hospitals and other industries.

"That's why it's important to have good controls over all nuclear materials," he said.

Patricia Lewis, UNIDIR director, said a dirty bomb would not cause much damage but over time would increase levels. She also said that news of a radioactive blast could cause mass panic and that the economic and cleanup costs would be enormous.

In Edinburgh, Mr. Nye stressed to security specialists from more than 60 countries, including

the United States, that "we have seen al Qaeda's leader in Iraq calling for nuclear scientists to join global jihad and there is no doubt that core al Qaeda retains the ambition to build or obtain nuclear weapons."

He said that at the moment, "it is questionable" whether the intent is supported by real capability but cautioned that a series of successful interceptions of radiological and fissile material by security forces show that it is possible to obtain materials, painting a worrying picture of a continuing and increasing threat.

In its 2006 annual report, the Vienna-based IAEA reported 149 incidents of illicit nuclear-materials trafficking in that year.

The total included 15 seizures of nuclear and radioactive material from people involved in trafficking and smuggling, the IAEA report said.

"We are in the same global boat in the fight against nuclear terrorism," Tomihiro Taniguchi, IAEA deputy director general.

"There is now universal recognition of the illicit trafficking problem and more uniform agreement on the need to take action to combat nuclear terrorism," Mr. Taniguchi said.

The report said one incident involved the seizure of uranium enriched to 89 percent.

The IAEA said more than 50 percent involved theft and loss of material.

It also noted that in about 75 percent of the cases, the material has not been recovered, "adding to the pool of lost material, some of which is potentially available for malicious use."

In late November, authorities in Slovakia arrested two Hungarians and a Ukrainian in an attempted sale of uranium, according to an Associated Press report.

Steven Aoki, deputy undersecretary for counterterrorism, told delegates that the IAEA database has recorded more than 600 incidents since 1993 and pointed out that while the vast majority turned out to be scams and frauds, "there have certainly been at least a few cases in which traffickers managed to obtain actual weapons-grade nuclear material."

Mr. Aoki said that recently, 60 countries have joined co-sponsors United States and Russia as partners in the Global Initiative to Combat Nuclear Terrorism, under which nations share techniques to fight the threat and participate in joint exercises.

This has included, he said, establishing cooperative procedures "to interdict sea and air shipments of materials related to weapons of mass destruction, potentially including nuclear materials and related technology."

The U.S. also is actively cooperating with allies and interested countries around the world to boost surveillance at major ports and border crossings, according to U.S. officials. This includes the installation of radiation-detection equipment in ports around the world such as Antwerp,

Belgium; Rotterdam, the Netherlands; and Singapore.

In October, in a statement to the House Committee on Homeland Security, Mr. Aoki said that "in this post-Cold-War world, nuclear terrorism may be the single most catastrophic threat that this nation faces."

Besides terrorists acquiring materials to construct radioactive dispersal devices (RDD) or dirty bombs, Mr. Aoki warned that they could also acquire special nuclear materials — plutonium or enriched uranium — and build an improvised nuclear device, or acquire one from a nuclear weapons state.

Finally, Mr. Aoki told the Senate Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee on Nov. 15, in a statement titled "Not a matter of if, but of when," that the scale of the consequences of an RDD detonation "would be far less than detonation involving fissionable materials."

"Whereas a nuclear detonation would cause catastrophic casualties and environmental and property damage, detonation of an RDD would primarily cause panic and economic consequences."

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