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Wamp: 'Dirty bombs' could be greatest threat

Ohio National Guard team trains at Y-12

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Oak Ridge, TN — The threat of a so-called "dirty bomb" could be the greatest nuclear threat facing the United States, but it is also the least discussed, U.S. Rep. Zach Wamp said Friday.

"The dirty bomb threat is the one that scares the most people," said Wamp, a Chattanooga Republican whose district includes Oak Ridge.

A "dirty bomb" combines radioactive material with a conventional explosive, like dynamite, and often includes other materials.

On Friday, Wamp was at the Y-12 National Security Complex, observing training at the Nuclear and Radiological Field Training Center. Using real radioactive materials, 14 members of the Ohio National Guard spent time there last week, learning to detect and identify radioactive materials, said Lt. Col. David Seitz, commander of the state's 52nd Civil Support Team.

Officials said the Y-12 center is the only training facility of its kind in the country.

Wamp, whose visit Friday was his first one to the center, said the United States is not well-prepared to respond to a dirty bomb threat.

"That's why these training sessions are so important," he said.

With nuclear expertise dating back to World War II, Y-12 is the "perfect training ground," Wamp said.

Seitz said some radioactive materials are harder to detect than others. For example, cesium is more radioactive than uranium.

Also, the most radioactive materials are not necessarily the most dangerous, Seitz said.

It was the first training of its type for the 52nd Civil Support Team, but it won't be the last.

At Y-12, the Ohio team confronted a variety of training scenarios, ranging from a bomb that had exploded inside a building to a radiological device detected in a van.

During a media tour Friday morning, three Guardsmen in white paper suits were near the van, wearing face shields and masks, and measuring radiation and oxygen levels.

"I think they have done a fantastic job," Seitz said of his unit, based in Columbus, Ohio.

The team's mission is to respond to known or suspected incidents that involve weapons of mass destruction.

Wamp said there are 55 National Guard incident teams across the country.

Derrick Dameron, Nuclear and Radiological Field Training Center project manager, said units from Georgia, Louisiana and the U.S. Army have also trained at the center, which has been operational since September 2006 in an old Manhattan Project-era building.

Dameron said training can vary based upon unit requests, but the center offers at least eight training scenarios.

"They come in with a little skill and leave with a lot," Y-12 spokesman Bill Wilburn said.

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