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Articles & Other Documents:

[Iran's Nuclear Ambitions Must Be Resisted, Gates Says At Whiteman](#)

[U.S. Issues Plan On Missile Defense](#)

[Former CIA Director: U.S. Vulnerable To Anthrax Attack](#)

[Iran: New Long-Range Missile](#)

[U.S. To Hold N. Korea To Nuclear Promises](#)

[ICBM Crews' Work Largely Unchanged Since Cold War](#)

[Nuclear Agency Wants More From Iran](#)

[U.S., Russia Discuss Missile Defense](#)

[European ports install radiation detectors as U.S. delays](#)

[Uranium could have made dirty bomb](#)

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Kansas City Star
November 21, 2007
Pg. 6

Iran's Nuclear Ambitions Must Be Resisted, Gates Says At Whiteman

By Scott Canon, The Kansas City Star

WHITEMAN AIR FORCE BASE, Mo. -- Defense Secretary Robert Gates said Tuesday that Iran's nuclear ambitions must be resisted with every option, from hard-edged economic sanctions to the threat of military force. Speaking to about 170 mostly civilian Air Force boosters at the home of the B-2 stealth bomber - among the weapons most likely to be used should President Bush or his successor order an attack on the Tehran government - Gates said the United States could not tolerate the development of nuclear weapons by Iran.

"We have to keep all of our options open," he said in a brief speech to the Whiteman Base Community Council. The defense secretary cited North Korea's agreement to back off on development of its strategic weapons when other powers in the world banded to impose pressure.

"They came under very severe economic sanctions that were beginning to bite in very real ways," Gates said. He said a military attack on Iran needed to remain a plausible but remote option.

"Another war is the last thing the Middle East needs right now," Gates said.

He spoke for about a half-hour, regaling a standing-room-only crowd at the base social club with stories of his days at Whiteman in the late 1960s. He was a young Air Force officer playing a small role in coordinating the dozens of nuclear missile silos then surrounding the base and dealing with complaints from local farmers about the presence of the facilities in their fields. The missile field was dismantled in the 1990s.

Gates recalled that one farmer was shocked at seeing a film of the doors of a silo being blasted off in preparation for a missile launch and how that would pose a hazard to his cattle.

"We told him that if the door blew off the silo he would have bigger problems to worry about than the life of his cows," Gates said.

Asked about results from this year's troop surge in Iraq, he said there was wide recognition that security had improved through much of the country. Yet Iraqis still have monumental issues to settle among themselves, he said, particularly in dividing the proceeds from the country's oil reserves and sorting out how much room to make in the Shiite-dominated government for former Baathists who flourished during Saddam Hussein's rule.

"These are," he said, "really fundamental questions."

<http://www.kansascity.com/news/local/story/370273.html>

[\(Return to Articles and Documents List\)](#)

Washington Post

November 23, 2007

Pg. 13

ICBM Crews' Work Largely Unchanged Since Cold War

By Walter Pincus, Washington Post Staff Writer

Air Force Capt. Elizabeth Buss will spend 72 hours this week -- including Thanksgiving -- sitting day and night in eight-hour shifts before a console and computer screens 65 feet underground in a blast-proof, launch-control capsule under a facility in a field miles from Malmstrom Air Force Base in Montana, as the commander of a three-officer team monitoring 10 Minuteman III intercontinental ballistic missiles.

An Air Force-trained chef, who lives with the team for those 72 hours in a space above the launch capsule, served turkey and all the trimmings to each officer at the end of their shifts.

Buss and her colleagues, along with others in more than 14 similar launch facilities in the area, monitor the more than 140 other ICBMs based at Malmstrom, awaiting an order that must come from President Bush to launch. Each missile carries a nuclear warhead that could strike anywhere within 35 minutes and deliver an explosive power 30 times more powerful than that of the Hiroshima bomb.

"Not a lot has changed in how we do business since the end of the Cold War," Buss's superior, Col. Sandra Finan, commander of the 341st Space Wing at Malmstrom, said in a recent interview.

That is why former senator Sam Nunn (D-Ga.) and other nuclear experts are trying anew to get the United States and Russia to extend warning times and reduce the number of weapons on alert. For Nunn, a longtime chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee, the August episode in which a B-52 bomber crew unknowingly carried six cruise missiles with nuclear warheads over the country showed that accidents can happen, despite systems to prevent them.

"Perhaps we're foolproof," Nunn said recently, but the B-52 incident shows "human error can happen, and it can happen in communications or digital intervention." He added that Moscow's and Washington's nuclear ICBMs on alert represent a "posture more dangerous to us than any threat justifies."

One reason for keeping crews down in capsules, according to retired Air Force Gen. Eugene E. Habiger, a former head of the Strategic Command, "is that the natural state of an ICBM is on alert, with its nuclear warhead on and solid-fuel engines powered up. . . . The crews are needed to monitor the systems." De-alerting is often examined, he said, but no system has been developed.

"There are a lot of mission requirements we do down there," Buss said in a recent interview. These include checking the status of the missiles, testing secure communications, facing inspections and looking for potential security problems. Launching exercises take place on the days when the officers are back at Malmstrom.

Fewer missiles are on alert since the Cold War era, and they carry fewer warheads. The ICBMs no longer target Russian missile sites and cities. Instead, they are aimed at what Maj. Gen. Roger W. Burg calls "broad ocean area targeting." Burg is commander of the 20th Air Force, Air Force Space Command.

However, Burg explained in a recent interview, many targets can be put into their guidance system within minutes, thanks to REACT, the Rapid Execution and Combat Targeting modification, which started to be installed in 1996.

And a \$6.7 billion modernization of the missiles is nearly 80 percent complete, Burg said. All motors on the missiles have been changed; better guidance packages and new command-and-control systems are in place.

Other recent changes are aimed at helping the "missileers" pass their time, since the old threat of a Russian first strike has essentially vanished. Each launch facility has not only a chef who prepares meals at all hours of the day or night, but also a television and a gym for workouts.

The National Security Agency for years objected to allowing an Internet connection in the launch facility for fear hackers could cause trouble. In August, however, that ban was lifted, and crew members pass much time online, mainly on studies. Buss, a Reserve Officer Training Corps graduate of Columbia University, is working on a master's degree.

A majority of those drawing missile-launch positions are recent college graduates who got their commissions by taking ROTC, Burg said. Because the four-year tour is stable, many officers take Air Force or other graduate courses in their spare time. Buss said it is "very common" that crew members use their time off for school work.

<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/11/22/AR2007112201294.html>

[\(Return to Articles and Documents List\)](#)

Washington Times

November 23, 2007

Pg. 17

U.S. Issues Plan On Missile Defense

MOSCOW — The United States has formally made new proposals to Russia aimed at easing tension over its missile-defense plans in Europe, the Russian Foreign Ministry said yesterday.

Russia has denounced U.S. plans to deploy a radar in the Czech Republic and interceptor missiles in Poland as a threat to its security. It offered building up a joint missile-defense system instead but this idea has aroused little interest in Washington.

"The American side has finally, and late at night, passed to Russia written proposals regarding anti-missile defense systems. We are studying them," said Foreign Ministry spokesman Andrei Krivtsov.

<http://www.washingtontimes.com/article/20071123/FOREIGN/111230060/1003/foreign>

[\(Return to Articles and Documents List\)](#)

New York Times

November 23, 2007

Pg. 10

Nuclear Agency Wants More From Iran

By Ariane Bernard and Elaine Sciolino

VIENNA, Nov. 22 — Iran is making progress in resolving suspicions about past nuclear activities but must do more before the International Atomic Energy Agency can verify important aspects of the country's nuclear program, the agency's director said Thursday.

The director, Mohamed ElBaradei, also said that the agency's knowledge of Iran's current nuclear activities was diminishing and that he could not declare with certainty whether Iran's program was peaceful or intended to make weapons.

"The agency has so far not been able to verify some important aspects of Iran's nuclear program," Dr. ElBaradei told a meeting of the agency's 35-country board. Outstanding issues, he said, include "those relevant to the scope and nature of Iran's centrifuge enrichment activities, as well as those relevant to alleged studies and other activities that could have military applications."

The result, he added, was that the agency is "unable to provide credible assurance about the absence of undeclared nuclear material and activities."

The United Nations Security Council imposed sanctions on Iran after its refusal to suspend its production of enriched uranium, which can be used in nuclear power plants or to fuel a nuclear weapon.

Western powers, including the United States, are highly suspicious of Iran's nuclear program, and their reaction to Dr. ElBaradei's remarks was predictably negative.

In a statement to the board, Gregory L. Schulte, the American ambassador to the nuclear agency, denounced what he called Iran's delay tactics, saying, "We fear that the next few weeks will not yield much more from Iran than we've seen in the last few months or, for that matter, the last five years."

Speaking on behalf of France as well as Britain and Germany, the French ambassador to the agency, François-Xavier Deniau, said, "We're disappointed that cooperation by Iran is only partial and reactive," adding that the Security Council should consider tougher sanctions.

"Waiting is not an option," he said. "Under these conditions, we believe it is necessary to set a deadline to the process and that that deadline be in a few weeks, as proposed by the director general." Iran insists its program is peaceful and strictly geared toward the civilian aim of producing electricity, which is its right as a signatory to the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty.

In his address to the nuclear agency's board, Dr. ElBaradei spoke of a "crucial" need for Iran to "restore confidence" in its nuclear program in light of its history of undeclared activity. He urged Iran to "take all the confidence-building measures called for by the Security Council, including the suspension of enrichment related activities."

But he also praised the "good progress" made on some questions Iran had long refused to address, like how it had obtained material to build enrichment centrifuges from the black market.

Under terms of a "work plan" concluded by Iran and the nuclear agency last summer, Iran was to have met a series of deadlines to resolve all unanswered questions about suspicious nuclear activities dating back two decades.

In announcing the work plan in August, Dr. ElBaradei said its deadlines proved that the plan was "not an open-ended invitation to dallying with the agency or a ruse to prolong negotiations and avoid sanctions."

The agreed timeline set November as a target date for Iran to answer all outstanding agency questions about the history of its program to build centrifuges — the tall, thin machines that spin rapidly to enrich, or concentrate, uranium 235, which can fuel nuclear reactors and at highly enriched levels, atom bombs.

On the day that the report was released to the agency board last week, one senior official linked to the nuclear agency said that he would not call the centrifuge file "closed."

But according to Dr. ElBaradei's remarks on Thursday, Iran's agreement with the agency "is proceeding according to schedule."

Yet the target date of completing the verification work is fluid. Although Dr. ElBaradei has said that the goal of the work plan was to wrap up nuclear issues under investigation for four years by December, Iranian and other agency officials acknowledged that it may take several more months.

Iran, meanwhile, cast Dr. ElBaradei's statements in a positive light, saying that they prove the country's good will and cooperation.

"We will continue our work plan, the issue will be resolved soon and Iran has shown and will show utmost cooperation, proactive cooperation with the I.A.E.A.," Ali Asghar Soltaniyeh, Iran's ambassador to the agency, told reporters in Vienna after Dr. ElBaradei's address.

At a conference in Paris on Thursday, the European Union's foreign policy chief, Javier Solana, said Iran's stated ambitions concerning its enriched uranium output was inconsistent with its acquisition of the civilian nuclear technology that would justify it.

"It is a bit like if you were trying to make your own fuel before having purchased a car and learned how to drive," Mr. Solana said.

Mr. Solana represents the United States, Russia, China, Britain, France and Germany in talks with Iran. He is scheduled to report by the end of November whether Iran is continuing to refuse to suspend its enrichment of uranium.

Ariane Bernard reported from Vienna and Elaine Sciolino from Paris.

http://www.nytimes.com/2007/11/23/world/middleeast/23nuke.html?_r=1&oref=slogin

[\(Return to Articles and Documents List\)](#)

Arizona Republic (Phoenix)

November 24, 2007

Former CIA Director: U.S. Vulnerable To Anthrax Attack

By Michael Walsh, Capital News Service

WASHINGTON - The United States is still "very poorly prepared" for an anthrax attack six years after a 2001 attack targeted Congress and television broadcasters, said a former CIA director.

"There is very little attention being paid to biological weapons," James Woolsey said. "And that's a shame."

Woolsey spoke Wednesday at a news conference called to release a report from ExecutiveAction, a Washington, D.C.-based consultant, analyzing three anthrax attack scenarios, including a hypothetical attack at the Academy Awards.

Neil Livingston, ExecutiveAction chief executive officer, said the report was meant to be an "educational document" for the public and to show the risks that America faces.

"Although much has been done to prepare for an attack, we are still vulnerable," he said.

Speakers were concerned about the ability of terrorists to get anthrax through doctors and scientists.

"Terrorists could recruit a scientist at a laboratory who had access to a lethal strain of anthrax," Livingston said.

"Alternatively, they could break into a laboratory, bribe a scientist or threaten a scientist to obtain a sample."

Livingston said that once obtained, anthrax "can be smuggled into just about any building in the United States." "Someone could just open up a sugar packet (filled with anthrax), spread it on a table and then leave the room," he said.

Livingston pointed to the mystery that still surrounds the 2001 attack - that struck in Florida, Connecticut, New York and metropolitan Washington, D.C. - as evidence that anthrax is on the back burner.

Stephen Hatfill, a Fort Detrick, Md., scientist, was a person of interest in the attacks, but was not charged.

Five people died in the attack.

"The most alarming thing is that we have not solved the 2001 anthrax attacks," Livingston said.

"Half of my colleagues believe that (Hatfill) carried (the attacks) out, and half believe he's innocent."

Though the amount of anthrax used in the attacks was small, it was still enough to shut down the Hart Senate Office Building for five months and require millions of dollars in decontamination costs.

If terrorists were to step up the amounts of anthrax or "get creative" in another attack, the results could be devastating beyond the loss of life, said David Wright, president of the Annapolis-based biodefense company PharmAthene.

"A one-gallon, Ziploc bag of anthrax is enough to destroy the U.S. economy," Wright said. "I don't want to scare people, but this is scary."

The report also focused on the aftermath of an attack, and called for increased stockpiles of antibiotics, therapeutics (which provide protection after antibiotics lose their effectiveness) and a modern vaccine.

The anthrax vaccine is solely available to the military and is a six-shot sequence, Livingston said.

Wright said the federal government needs to step up its funding through Project Bioshield - a program created in 2004 to provide medical countermeasures in case of a biological attack.

Bioshield has received \$5.6 billion in funding so far, a "good first step" but far short of what is needed to protect the American people, Wright said.

"We need to be more aggressive," he said. "We hope this report will be a call to action."

Wright estimated that between \$40 billion and \$50 billion would be needed for Project Bioshield, calling the funding now a "drop in the bucket."

"Even with a blank check it would take us two years to protect the American people (from an anthrax attack)," Wright said.

Livingston said the money would be well worth the devastation the nation could avoid.

Speakers said the next anthrax attack is a matter of "when," not "if."

Woolsey's belief in the inevitability of a biological terrorist attack is derived from the terrorist mindset.

"There's nothing in those beliefs that puts a constraint on dying horribly while killing massively," he said.

Woolsey said the fanaticism of terrorists makes him nostalgic for the days of the Cold War.

"I don't miss the oppression of eastern Europe," Woolsey said.

"But there are days when I miss the Soviets when I think of al-Qaida and Hezbollah.

"The Soviets were a difficult enemy but one we could deter and contain."

<http://www.azcentral.com/news/articles/1124Anthrax1124.html>

[\(Return to Articles and Documents List\)](#)

Washington Times

November 27, 2007

Pg. 4

U.S., Russia Discuss Missile Defense

By Bill Gertz, Washington Times

U.S. and Russian negotiators met yesterday to discuss a U.S. plan for joint missile defenses in Europe that would include delayed activation of missile interceptors, Bush administration officials said.

The two-hour meeting at the State Department included talks aimed at reducing Moscow's opposition to building a third U.S. anti-missile interceptor site in Poland and Czech Republic.

Details of the U.S. plan are being kept secret, but its two main elements call for implementing joint monitoring and threat assessments and for integrating U.S., Russian and NATO defenses against Iranian long-range nuclear missiles.

The "confidence-building and transparency" measures in the plan seek to assure the Kremlin that the 10 interceptors deployed in Poland and a radar in nearby Czech Republic do not threaten Russia, a State Department official said, noting the measure could include Russian inspections if Warsaw and Prague agree.

The plan also calls for developing a "cooperative" U.S., Russian and NATO missile defense using Russian radar and sensors, along with NATO systems, that would link early warning data on missile threats and include some intelligence-sharing, the official said.

"We're not saying we're not going to activate it until" Russia agrees an Iranian threat exists, the official said. "But we are saying we're happy to sit down and talk of joint monitoring; can we jointly say there is no threat from Iran so we won't turn it on?"

The official said the International Atomic Energy Agency and others say Iran could have a nuclear-capable missile in three to eight years. It would take several years for the Pentagon to put the interceptors and radar in Central Europe, he said, and the U.S. would "rather be prepared than running behind the curve."

Defense and military officials are opposed to giving Moscow a say on when U.S. missile defenses can be activated, noting that doing so would undermine the effectiveness of the system.

Russian Deputy Prime Minister Sergei Ivanov told reporters in Moscow yesterday "we are ready for dialogue." But some Russian military leaders recently rejected the U.S. proposal, insisting that U.S. missile interceptors threaten Russia's security.

<http://www.washingtontimes.com/article/20071127/NATION/111270033/1002>

[\(Return to Articles and Documents List\)](#)

New York Times
November 28, 2007

Iran: New Long-Range Missile

By Nazila Fathi

The defense minister, Mostafa Mohammad Najjar, said Iran had built a new long-range missile. In comments reported by the Fars news agency, he said the missile had range of 1,200 miles. He did not say how the missile, called Ashoura, differed from the Shahab-3, also with a range of 1,200 miles, or if it had been test fired.

http://www.nytimes.com/2007/11/28/world/middleeast/28briefs-missile.html?_r=1&ref=world&oref=slogin

[\(Return to Articles and Documents List\)](#)

GovExec.com

European ports install radiation detectors as U.S. delays

By Jon Fox *Global Security Newswire* November 27, 2007

EDINBURGH -- European officials are forging ahead with plans to deploy more-expensive, next-generation radiation detectors at ports in Belgium and the Netherlands even as the United States is delaying plans to deploy the new equipment due to questions about technical efficacy.

Just last week, U.S. officials announced that the Homeland Security Department is slowing plans to roll out 1,400 monitors, each costing nearly \$400,000, as part of a \$1.2 billion multiyear project. In field tests, the new Advanced Spectroscopic Portal monitors, or ASPs, "led to the determination that additional functional capacity is needed to meet the operational standards," a department spokeswoman announced.

The announcement, which means the machines could take another year to reach U.S. ports, comes after more than a year of sparring between DHS officials and the Government Accountability Office over how effective the technology is as well as testing methods used to evaluate it.

The debate over the new equipment has largely played out in congressional hearings. In September, Government Accountability Office officials argued that DHS testing was based on a "biased" methodology that allowed vendors an artificial edge during the evaluation of their radiation detectors, an allegation Homeland Security officials said was off base.

Officials at the Belgian port of Antwerp, however, are moving ahead with deployment of the ASPs for use in secondary screening.

"We're in the process of finalizing it now," Pascal Fias, a scientist working at the Antwerp port, said last week during an International Atomic Energy Agency-sponsored conference on nuclear trafficking here.

In the Netherlands, Dutch customs officials are already using the ASP detectors in secondary deployments and expect to eventually use them as primary scanners, Fias said.

Containers at ports are typically put through a two-phase scanning process. During the first phase, the shipping containers are sent through very sensitive detectors called plastic scintillators. Plastic scintillators can detect very low-level radiation emissions but are incapable of identifying the isotope emitting the energy.

Due to their sensitivity, they can be triggered by innocuous cargo with trace levels of natural radiation like granite, kitty litter or bananas. In one instance a load of blueberries set off Belgian alarms. The fruit exhibited trace levels of cesium contamination, a legacy from Chernobyl, Fias said.

If the primary detectors discover the presence of radiation, the shipping container is then sent through a secondary screening where customs officials use hand-held devices to determine the nature of the source.

After the latest round of GAO criticism of the DHS technology vetting process, Homeland Security officials suggested the ASP detectors would first be deployed in secondary locations and testing would continue before replacing the plastic scintillators.

While Belgian port officials have no plans to shift the ASP to a primary detection deployment - they say they have the plastic scintillators and might as well use them - the new technology is perfect for secondary screening, they say. "For the second phase, it makes a lot of sense to use the ASP," Fias told *Global Security Newswire*, calling the technology currently "the best on the market."

Without the ASP detectors, custom officials must use a small, hand-held scanner to assess the entire shipping container. That is a small scanner and a large box, a combination that has led to complaints from customs officials at the port, Fias said.

By contrast, the ASP scanners are "basically a very, very big detector that can scan the whole of the container," he said. Replacing primary scanners with the new technology requires any new device to be at least as sensitive as the plastic scintillators, Fias notes, a more challenging bar to meet.

The goal with these detector upgrades, both domestically and abroad, is not necessarily increasing the level of radiation detection at ports, but rather smoothing the flow of commerce and making sure current detection regime is not disruptive. U.S. officials have repeatedly said the goal is to lower the number of false alarms at large ports such as Los Angeles/Long Beach. That port, the nation's busiest, has about 500 radiation alerts a day, and DHS officials suggest the new technology could plunge that number to less than 30.

"We want to have a low economic impact. Time is money, certainly in a port," Fias said of Antwerp. "Only 1 in 10,000 containers are delayed for more than a few hours or days."

He expects the ASPs, to be used in conjunction with x-ray scanning, to be rolled out in Antwerp by the end of next year.

http://govexec.com/story_page.cfm?articleid=38661&dcn=todaysnews

[\(Return to Articles and Documents List\)](#)

Washington Times

November 29, 2007

Pg. 1

U.S. To Hold N. Korea To Nuclear Promises

Hill dispatched to Pyongyang to seek compliance

By Nicholas Kravev, Washington Times

The chief U.S. negotiator with North Korea, concerned that Pyongyang might fail to provide a full declaration of its nuclear-related materials and activities by year's end, as it has promised, will return to the North on Monday, U.S. officials said yesterday.

The envoy, Christopher R. Hill, whose visit will be the second in less than six months, warned of a "crisis" if North Korea's list falls short of a "full disclosure."

Mr. Hill intends to tell the North Koreans what the United States expects to see on the list and plans to press them particularly on two main issues: their suspected uranium-enrichment program and the exact number and type of their nuclear weapons, diplomats said.

"Whatever declaration they make needs to be full and complete with respect to their nuclear program," State Department spokesman Sean McCormack told reporters. "It's going to be an important element of what they produce as part of their commitments under the six-party talks."

An incomplete list would stall the six-nation process that envisions the North dismantling its nuclear programs in exchange for political and economic rewards from the United States, South Korea, China, Japan and Russia.

"The data declaration will be a critical test of the North's real willingness to give up its nuclear weapons," said Bruce Klingner, senior research fellow at the Heritage Foundation.

The uranium-enrichment issue appears to be the most challenging, diplomats and analysts said. Washington accused North Korea of pursuing such a program in 2002, based on information from Pakistan that it had sold the North centrifuges and other related materials.

Pyongyang has repeatedly denied the U.S. claim, and the Bush administration has refused to share proof even with its closest Asian allies.

Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf wrote about the North Korean purchases from the shadowy network of A.Q. Khan, the father of the Pakistani atom bomb, in his autobiography "In the Line of Fire," which he promoted last year on U.S. TV talk shows.

Although the North is said to have admitted to acquiring various materials that could be used in a uranium-enrichment program, it is still refusing to acknowledge possessing centrifuges, the core element in such a program. "If there is even the slightest doubt in the international community that a uranium-enrichment program exists, the North Koreans will play on that doubt," said Michael O'Hanlon, senior fellow in foreign policy studies at the Brookings Institution.

"This will probably be a tactical negotiation, though they would be better off making a clean decision" to disclose everything they have, he said.

Mr. O'Hanlon and other analysts said the North Koreans could be holding on to the centrifuges card to force the United States to take them off its list of state sponsors of terrorism.

The other thorny issue is the number of the North's plutonium-based weapons. The chief North Korean negotiator, Kim Kye-gwan, has said that neither the number nor the exact type will be disclosed, but Mr. Hill has made it clear he expects to see that information in the declaration.

Another matter — the clarity of which is far from certain — is the North's proliferation activities.

Following an Israeli air strike on a suspected nuclear facility in Syria that may have been housing materials from North Korea, President Bush said Pyongyang had agreed in an Oct. 3 six-party statement to provide "a full declaration of any proliferation activities."

The document in question does say that the North is "committed not to transfer nuclear materials, technology or know-how," but when it comes to the declaration, it says it "will include all nuclear facilities, materials and programs." There is no mention of documenting proliferation activities.

Mr. Klingner said Mr. Bush "may have inadvertently raised the bar."

Mr. Hill said during a stop in Japan yesterday that, in addition to Pyongyang, he would visit the North's main nuclear complex in Yongbyon, whose main facilities are currently being disabled as part of the Oct. 3 agreement.

"I think we are making progress and clearly we have more to do, but I think we are on schedule for getting to the end of the year and getting all our commitments done," Mr. Hill told reporters in Tokyo.

<http://www.washingtontimes.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20071129/FOREIGN/111290086/1001>

[\(Return to Articles and Documents List\)](#)

YAHOO! News
Associated Press

Uranium could have made dirty bomb

By KAREL JANICEK and WILLIAM J. KOLE, Associated Press Writers

Two Hungarians and a Ukrainian arrested in an attempted sale of uranium were peddling material believed to be from the former Soviet Union, police said Thursday. Officials claimed it was weapons-grade uranium, but outside experts questioned that assessment and suggested it might be far less lethal.

The three men, who were arrested Wednesday in eastern Slovakia and Hungary, were trying to sell about a pound of uranium in powder form, said First Police Vice President Michal Kopcik.

"It was possible to use it in various ways for terrorist attacks," Kopcik said.

Kopcik said investigators believed the uranium was suitable for a radiological "dirty bomb." He said the uranium had been stashed in unspecified containers, and that investigators determined it contained 98.6 percent uranium-235. Uranium is considered weapons-grade if it contains at least 85 percent uranium-235.

But nuclear experts who were shown police photographs of radioactivity readings contended the material was probably not as dangerous as authorities believe.

Experts suggested the police confused a scientific reading of the material as dealing with its "concentration" of uranium-235, when in fact it was just a "confidence" level of the machine to give an accurate reading.

"Uranium is not very radiotoxic," said David Albright, a former U.N. weapons inspector who is now president of the Institute for Science and International Security in Washington.

"The net effect of dispersing half a kilo (about a pound) of uranium — who cares? Each person would get so little it would have no effect," Albright said.

Alexander Glaser, a researcher at Princeton University's Program in Science and Global Security, said any discussion of dirty bombs in this case was "off topic."

"Even naturally occurring uranium would be more effective than this in making a dirty bomb," he said.

Investigators were still working to determine who ultimately was trying to buy the uranium, which the three allegedly were selling for \$1 million.

Kopcik said police had intelligence suggesting that the suspects — whose names were not released but were all men aged 40, 49 and 51 — originally had planned to close the deal sometime between Sunday and Wednesday. Police moved in when the sale did not occur as expected, he said.

One of the Hungarians had been living in Ukraine.

Kopcik said three other suspects — including a Slovak national identified only as Eugen K. — were detained in the neighboring Czech Republic in mid-October for allegedly trying to sell fake radioactive materials. It was unclear to what degree, if any, they played a role in the thwarted uranium sale.

"According to initial findings, the material originated in the former Soviet republics," Kopcik said.

The arrests heightened long-standing concerns that Eastern Europe is serving as a source of radioactive material for terrorist weapons.

Experts say roughly 55 pounds of highly enriched uranium or plutonium is needed in most instances to fashion a crude nuclear device. But they say a tiny fraction of that is enough for a dirty bomb — a weapon whose main purpose would be to create fear and chaos, not human casualties.

Vitaly Fedchenko, a researcher with the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, said people should not get the idea that the world is awash in easily obtainable bomb components.

"The danger is definitely there. But there's no reason to panic," he said. "Most of the 'buyers' out there are law enforcement agents. And not all of the materials out there are weapons grade."

Eastern Slovakia's border with Ukraine is the European Union's easternmost frontier, and authorities have spent millions tightening security in recent years, fearing terrorists or organized crime syndicates could smuggle in weapons, explosives and other contraband.

In 2003, police in the Czech Republic, which borders Slovakia, arrested two Slovaks in a sting operation in the city of Brno after they allegedly sold undercover officers natural depleted uranium for \$715,000.

Slovak and Hungarian police worked together on the new case starting in August, Kopcik said.

Ukraine's Interior Ministry declined immediate comment on the arrests. Marina Ostapenko, spokeswoman for the National Security Service, said she did not have any information, and the Ukrainian atomic agency could not be reached for comment.

But Natalia Shumkova, head of the Fuel and Energy Ministry's nuclear energy department, said the International Atomic Energy Agency strictly controls all the enriched uranium that is used in Ukraine.

Ukrainian authorities, Western governments and international watchdogs repeatedly have warned that radioactive material from the nation's 15 operational reactors and the Chernobyl nuclear power plant could find its way into the hands of terrorists.

In recent years, Ukrainian authorities have arrested more than a dozen people on suspicion of smuggling or purchasing radioactive materials.

The IAEA, which closely tracks reports of illicit trafficking in radioactive materials, said it was trying to contact Slovak and Hungarian authorities for more information.

Richard Hoskins, an IAEA official who administers the tracking database, said that last year alone, the U.N. nuclear watchdog registered 252 reported cases of radioactive materials that were stolen, missing, smuggled or in the possession of unauthorized individuals — a 385 percent increase since 2002.

But Hoskins cautioned that the spike probably was due at least in part to better reporting and improved law enforcement efforts. Of the 252 cases, about 85 involved thefts or losses, and not all the material was suitable for use in a weapon, he said.

Even so, "there are far too many incidents of material not being properly controlled," Hoskins told The Associated Press in a telephone interview. "If we can do a better job, we can help keep these materials from falling into terrorist hands."

If terrorists ever succeeded in gathering enough material to make a nuclear weapon and detonate it, he added, "the consequences would be so catastrophic, the world would be a different place the next day."

Concerns about nuclear smuggling have generally been focused on Russia and countries of the former Soviet Union, where security at nuclear-related industries deteriorated after the 1991 Soviet collapse.

The U.S.-based Nuclear Threat Initiative, an organization dedicated to reducing the global threat from nuclear weapons, said in a report last year that Russia remains the prime country of concern for contraband nuclear material.

In 2006, Georgian agents working with CIA officials set up a sting that led to the arrest of a Russian citizen who tried to sell a small amount of weapons-grade uranium that he had in a plastic bag in his jacket pocket.

In 1997, seven men who officials said planned to smuggle 11 pounds of enriched uranium to Pakistan or China were arrested in Novosibirsk, Russia. That uranium reportedly had been stolen from a plant in the former Soviet republic of Kazakhstan.

http://news.yahoo.com/s/ap/20071129/ap_on_re_eu/nuclear_arrests;_ylt=AkSRk6KaAoP.8YEegqcz0AJvaA8F

[\(Return to Articles and Documents List\)](#)