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The Many Variables Of Smallpox Debate

Uncertainty Muddles Decision on Vaccine

By a Washington Post Staff Writer

Thursday, June 6, 2002; Page A03

Sometimes policymakers are forced to do what mathematicians would consider futile -- solve an equation in which many of the key variables and terms are missing.

Over the next three weeks, a panel of medical experts will debate whether the federal government should make smallpox vaccine widely available for the first time in 31 years. The decision -- one of many forced by last fall's episodes of biological terrorism -- will require a tricky balancing of risks and benefits in a state of great uncertainty.

The chance of a smallpox outbreak is unknown -- the disease was eradicated from the globe in 1980 -- so the most important variable can't be calculated. The risks of smallpox vaccine are also murky, because the American population is biologically different from what it was in 1971, when the substance was last used routinely.

Few doubt that paramedics, police, firefighters, physicians, nurses and epidemiologists are obvious candidates for vaccination because they would be likely to have early contact with victims of a bioterror attack. But precisely how to define the right group of "first responders" isn't clear. There's also no recent experience to guide the decision; the country's last emergency smallpox vaccination campaign was in 1947.

Beneath those large unknowns is a second order of uncertainty.

The vaccine is a live virus, vaccinia, which causes a mild infection that protects against smallpox. Although in most people vaccinia infection causes nothing more than a sore arm and low-grade fever, in those with abnormal immunity, vaccination can have serious and occasionally fatal results. The difficulty is that even some mild conditions, such as eczema, can signify that a person is at risk, and it is hard to identify all such people.

Furthermore, up to 20 percent of complications occur in people who were not themselves vaccinated, but acquired the virus from someone who was. Consequently, policymakers must consider such practical issues as whether anyone who gets the vaccine should stay off work for a week so they won't infect others.

There are also mundane uncertainties. For example, much of the existing vaccine is stored in vials containing 100 doses. How hard will it be to gather that many people together to get vaccinated at one time? How much waste should be tolerated?

"The subject is anything but clear what our recommendation will or should be," said D.A. Henderson, the chief adviser to Health and Human Services Secretary Tommy G. Thompson on biological terrorism preparedness. "It is not until you get down into the weeds that you see all the problems of trying to vaccinate any number of people."

Not least in the equation is public opinion about access to smallpox vaccine, all of which is owned by the federal government, and will continue to be for the indefinite future.

To gauge this last factor, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention is hosting four public forums across the country. The first two will convene tonight in New York and San Francisco. The third will be Saturday in St. Louis, and the fourth on Tuesday in San Antonio. On June 15, a forum at the National Academy of Sciences in Washington will solicit the opinion of scientists and clinicians about smallpox vaccine use.

On June 19 and 20, the Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices (ACIP) -- the federal government's permanent committee that helps formulate national vaccine policy -- will meet in Atlanta and decide on a recommendation to Thompson.

Routine smallpox vaccination continued in the military through 1989. Since then, only a few people, most of them scientists and epidemiologists affiliated with CDC, have gotten the procedure, which consists of scratching a drop of vaccinia-laden liquid into the skin with a pronged needle.

The most virulent strains of smallpox -- presumably what terrorists would use -- cause death in about 30 percent of infections. Modern intensive-care treatment might reduce mortality somewhat. An antiviral drug, cidofovir, has shown promising early results in fighting viral infections similar to smallpox. Nevertheless, the virus remains one of the more dangerous ones on Earth.

The government's current strategy against a smallpox outbreak is search-and-containment, also known as "ring containment." It consists of identifying people with the infection and vaccinating everyone who has had contact with them. During the global eradication campaign (which began in 1966 and officially ended in 1980), ring containment often had literal meaning, with health workers immunizing entire villages that contained smallpox cases, and sometimes even blocking roads in and out, to prevent the virus from escaping.

But the strategy doesn't require that everyone in a geographic area be vaccinated, or that movement of large numbers of unexposed people be limited. Experts say that even in Chicago, for example, a case of smallpox caused by a bioterror attack would not require quarantining and vaccinating all Chicagoans. However, anyone having contact with the infected person would be vaccinated, isolated and observed for a fever heralding onset of the disease.
Historically, ring containment worked for smallpox for several reasons. All infections are obvious because of the disease's dramatic, bumpy rash; people don't transmit the virus until the rash appears; and, most important, if someone is vaccinated within seven days of exposure, the risk of becoming infected is reduced substantially (by as much as 70 percent, according to old studies). The disease is less contagious than some viral infections, such as measles and influenza, with data from pre-eradication outbreaks in Asia suggesting that infection usually requires days of close exposure to someone who is sick.
Numerous veterans of the global eradication campaign say scenarios of wildfire smallpox epidemics -- such as "Dark Winter," a simulation sponsored by the Center for Strategic and International Studies last year in which a three-city bioterror event caused 100,000 deaths in five weeks -- are unrealistically extreme.
But proponents of making vaccine widely available argue that ring containment may not work in highly mobile, modern America, where almost the entire population -- and certainly everyone younger than 35 -- is susceptible to the virus. Only vaccination now will lower the risk of an out-of-control outbreak, they say.
At a meeting last month of members of ACIP and a related body, the National Vaccine Advisory Committee (NVAC), there was little support for making smallpox vaccination available to anyone who wanted it. Nevertheless, there appears to be public support for just that.
Interviewers hired by the Harvard School of Public Health and the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation last month asked a sample of 3,000 Americans whether they would get a smallpox vaccination if it were offered. Fifty-nine percent said yes.
Even with "permissive" use of the vaccine, everyone agrees many people shouldn't get it. They would include people with AIDS, some cancer patients, organ transplant recipients, people with the skin condition atopic dermatitis and, in the absence of an outbreak, probably pregnant women. This comprises a large fraction of the American population, as there are an estimated 46 million people with atopic dermatitis alone in the United States.
The last mass vaccination against smallpox took place in New York City in 1947, when the disease was imported from Mexico. There were 11 cases and two deaths. About 6 million people were immunized in a month, with nine or 10 deaths from vaccine complications.
http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A2516-2002Jun5.html

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US claims proof of Cuba's germ war project

Iranians have been buying its biotechnology, Senate is told

Julian Borger in Washington

Thursday June 6, 2002

The Guardian

The state department head of intelligence said yesterday that the US had "substantial information" that Cuba was developing biological weapons and exporting dual-use technology, which could be used for germ warfare, to Iran.
Carl Ford, assistant secretary of state for intelligence and research, told a Senate committee that he would only provide the evidence to a closed-door session later in the day, but he insisted that it was convincing.
"We feel very confident about saying that they're working on an effort that would give them a limited BW offensive capability. And that's serious enough for us to tell you," he said.
"If we didn't think that it was important ... we would have looked at the evidence and said: 'This is all bogus and there's nothing here worth reporting,' " he added.
His testimony marks an important step in a row that blew up on May 6, when a conservative political appointee to the state department, John Bolton, made a widely reported speech to a rightwing thinktank accusing Cuba of developing biological weapons and exporting dangerous technology to Iran.
Cuba and Iran rejected the accusation. Former president Jimmy Carter, who visited Cuba a week later, questioned Mr Bolton's claim and said he had not been told of them in intelligence briefings before his visit.

Democrats have accused rightwingers in the administration of using the "war on terror" to pursue their own agenda in Colombia and Cuba, and argued that Mr Bolton's claim was intended to undermine Mr Carter's Cuban visit and lay the ground for President Bush's renewal of sanctions against Cuba last month.
The Connecticut Democrat senator Chris Dodd, who chaired yesterday's hearing, said he was concerned that the administration was "raising spectres" which could divert resources from defending the US from more substantial terrorist threats.
But Mr Ford largely supported Mr Bolton's claim. He repeatedly distinguished between a biological warfare "effort", involving research into different kinds of germ agents, and a fully fledged "programme", which would involve adapting germs for warheads, putting them into shells and missiles, and stockpiling those munitions.
"We never tried to suggest that we have the evidence, the smoking gun, proof positive, that [the Cubans] have a pro gramme," he said. But he added: "Although we make a distinction between a programme and an effort, its not to say an effort can't hurt you.
"The fact is with BW you don't have to put it in a 130mm howitzer shell or deliver it by rocket for it to be dangerous.
"Unfortunately it's the sort of thing that can be carried by individuals and brought here in an unconventional way."
He said that Iran had bought dual-use equipment from Cuba, which has a sophisticated biomedical industry specialising in vaccines and cancer therapies, in part because of European and US restrictions on exports.
But he agreed under questioning by Democratic senators that other countries, including Nato allies, had also sold equipment to Iran which could be used for BW purposes.
Jose de la Fuente, a Cuban scientist who once ran Cuba's biotechnology centre in Havana, and who defected to the United States in 1999, has insisted that that he had neither seen nor heard of any Cuban attempts to develop biological weapons.
But he did express concern about Havana's technology transfers to Tehran.
"No one believes that Iran is interested in these technologies for the purpose of protecting all the children in the Middle East from hepatitis," he wrote in the journal Nature Biotechnology last year.
The US was alarmed by a speech made by Fidel Castro last year on strengthening ties between Havana and Tehranin which .
he said: "Iran and Cuba ... can bring America to its knees. The US regime is very weak and we are witnessing this weakness from close up."
http://www.guardian.co.uk/international/story/0,3604,728015,00.html

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U.S. authorities capture 'dirty bomb' suspect

His associate captured in Pakistan, U.S. officials say

June 10, 2002 Posted: 11:47 PM EDT (0347 GMT)
WASHINGTON (CNN) -- Federal officials have captured a U.S. citizen with suspected ties to al Qaeda who allegedly planned to build and explode a radioactive "dirty bomb" in the United States, the Justice Department said Monday.
U.S. officials said Washington was the probable target of the plot. FBI Director Robert Mueller said the plot was in the "discussion stage" when the suspect, Abdullah Al Muhajir, was arrested. Mueller said the plot had not gone any further, to the knowledge of U.S. authorities.
Attorney General John Ashcroft said Al Muhajir -- who was born Jose Padilla -- was captured May 8 as he flew from Pakistan into O'Hare International Airport in Chicago, Illinois. Officials described the flight as a reconnaissance mission.
Officials said that when Al Muhajir arrived in Chicago, he declared having $8,000 but was found to have more than $10,000 in his possession.
In the weeks before he flew to Chicago, Al Muhajir was tracked flying between Pakistan, Egypt and Switzerland, officials said.
U.S. officials later said an "associate" of Al Muhajir had been arrested in Pakistan before May 8. It was not clear whether this was the "associate" Ashcroft referred to when he said Al Muhajir was working with someone in Pakistan on plans to build a dirty bomb. (Full story)

A dirty bomb is a conventional bomb equipped with radioactive material designed to spread over a wide area. Depending on the circumstances of the explosion, the number of deaths and injuries from a dirty bomb might not be substantially greater than from a conventional bomb explosion. But panic over radioactivity and evacuation measures could snarl a city, and the area struck would be off-limits for at least several months during cleanup efforts. (More on dirty bombs)

Ashcroft said Al Muhajir, 31, would be treated as an "enemy combatant" of the United States, a move that means he has fewer legal rights than an ordinary defendant in a criminal case.

President Bush signed off Sunday night on the decision to treat Al Muhajir as an enemy combatant, senior U.S. officials said, adding the government faced a Tuesday deadline to decide whether to charge Al Muhajir in the federal court system or turn him over to the Defense Department.

Bush accepted the recommendations of Ashcroft and Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, the officials said, and the transfer from Justice Department to Defense Department custody was made Monday morning.

Ashcroft: Suspect 'trained with the enemy'

The Justice Department said Al Muhajir served time in prison in the United States in the early 1990s, when he took on his new name. After his release, he traveled to Afghanistan and Pakistan and met with senior al Qaeda officials, Ashcroft said.

"While in Afghanistan and Pakistan, Al Muhajir trained with the enemy, including studying how to wire explosive devices and researching radiological dispersion devices," Ashcroft said.

"Al Qaeda officials knew that as a citizen of the United States, as a citizen of the United States holding a valid U.S. passport, Al Muhajir would be able to travel freely in the United States without drawing attention to himself."

U.S. officials said the primary information about Al Muhajir came from Abu Zubaydah, the most senior al Qaeda figure captured by U.S. authorities.

Al Muhajir is being held at the Consolidated Naval Brig in Charleston, South Carolina, according to Pentagon officials. They said the suspect was being held separate from the regular brig population.

"We have acted under the laws of war and under the clear Supreme Court precedent which established that the military may detain a United States citizen who has joined the enemy and has entered our country to carry out hostile acts," Ashcroft said.

Ashcroft made the announcement in Moscow, Russia, where he is meeting with Russian officials to discuss the war on terrorism. (Read transcript)

"To our enemies, I say we will continue to be vigilant against all threats, whether they come from overseas or at home in America," he said.

Officials said Al Muhajir was born in New York on October 18, 1970, and moved to Chicago when he was 5 years old.

Sources said he served three years in a juvenile detention center in suburban Chicago for aggravated battery, armed robbery and attempted armed robbery. He was released in May 1988, shortly before his 18th birthday, and put on parole until he turned 21.

He was arrested in 1991 on a gun and assault charges stemming from a road rage incident in Sunrise, Florida.

The officers who made the arrest on October 8, 1991 -- Lt. Charles Vitale and Detective Neil Lawrence -- told CNN that Al Muhajir fired a .38-caliber handgun after getting into an argument with two men in another car at a gas station. No one was injured.

He was charged with two counts of aggravated assault, one count of using a firearm in the commission of a felony and one count of carrying a concealed firearm.

While Al Muhajir was in jail, he physically attacked a deputy, resulting in additional charges.

Al Muhajir spent 303 days in the county jail and was sentenced to a year's probation.

After his release in 1992, Al Muhajir was cited for several traffic violations in south Florida, Broward County officials said. His most recent violation was in November 1997.

Al Muhajir did not appear in court and an arrest warrant was issued in December 1997.

He had been out of the United States, primarily in the Middle East, since 1998.

http://www.cnn.com/2002/US/06/10/dirty.bomb.suspect/index.html

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The Department of Homeland Security

Chemical, Biological, Radiological, and Nuclear Countermeasures

The knowledge, technology, and material needed to build weapons of mass destruction are spreading inexorably. If our enemies acquire these weapons and the means to deliver them, they will use them potentially with consequences far more devastating than those we suffered on September 11.

The Department of Homeland Security would lead the federal government's efforts in preparing for and responding to the full range of terrorist threats involving weapons of mass destruction. To do this, the Department would set national policy and establish guidelines for state and local governments. It would direct exercises and drills for federal, state, and local chemical, biological, radiological, and nuclear (CBRN) response teams and plans. The result of this effort would be to consolidate and synchronize the disparate efforts of multiple federal agencies currently scattered across several departments. This would create a single office whose primary mission is the critical task of protecting the United States from catastrophic terrorism.

The Department would be responsible for several distinct capabilities and institutions that focus on specific elements of this mission. The Department would unify much of the federal government's efforts to develop and implement scientific and technological countermeasures to CBRN terrorist threats. The Department would also provide direction and establish priorities for national research and development, for related tests and evaluations, and for the development and procurement of new technology and equipment to counter the CBRN threat. The Department would incorporate and focus the intellectual energy and extensive capacity of several important scientific institutions, including Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory (currently part of the Department of Energy) and the Plum Island Animal Disease Center (Department of Agriculture).

The Department would unify our defenses against human, animal, and plant diseases that could be used as terrorist weapons. The Department would sponsor outside research, development, and testing to invent new vaccines, antidotes, diagnostics, and therapies against biological and chemical warfare agents; to recognize, identify, and confirm the occurrence of an attack; and to minimize the morbidity and mortality caused by any biological or chemical agent.

The Department would unify our defenses against agricultural terrorism – the malicious use of plant or animal pathogens to cause disease in the agricultural sector. The Department would exclude agricultural pests and diseases at the border. It would strengthen national research programs and surveillance systems to shield agriculture from natural or deliberately induced pests or disease. Working with the Department of Agriculture and the Department of Health and Human Services, it would also that ensure rigorous inspection and quality assurance programs protect the food supply from farm to fork.

Science & Technology Agenda. In the war against terrorism, America's vast science and technology base provides us with a key advantage. The Department would press this advantage with a national research and development enterprise for homeland security comparable in emphasis and scope to that which has supported the national security community for more than fifty years. This is appropriate, given the scale of the mission and the catastrophic potential of the threat. Many of the needed systems would be potentially continental in scope, and thus the technologies must scale appropriately, in terms of complexity, operation, and sustainability.

This research and development would be driven by a constant examination of the nation's vulnerabilities, constant testing of our security systems, and a constant evaluation of the threat and its weaknesses. The emphasis within this enterprise would be on catastrophic terrorism – threats to the security of our homeland that would result in large-scale loss of life and major economic impact. It would be aimed at both evolutionary improvements to current capabilities as well as the development of revolutionary new capabilities.

The following are examples of the types of research and development projects that the Department would pursue with its scientific assets.

- **Preventing importation of nuclear weapons and material.** The Department of Homeland Security would make defeating this threat a top priority of its research and development efforts. This nuclear denial program would develop and deploy new technologies and systems for safeguarding nuclear material stockpiles and for detecting the movement of those materials. In particular, it would focus on better detection of illicit nuclear material transport on the open seas, at U.S. ports of entry, and throughout the national transportation system.
- **Detecting bioterrorist attacks.** The anthrax attacks of October 2001 proved that quick recognition of biological terrorism is crucial to saving lives. The Department of Homeland Security would lead efforts to develop, deploy, manage, and maintain a national system for detecting the use of biological agents within the United States. This system would consist of a national public health data surveillance system to monitor

public and private databases for indications that a bioterrorist attack has occurred, as well as a sensor network to detect and report the release of bioterrorist pathogens in densely populated areas.

The technologies developed must not only make us safer, but also make our daily lives better. While protecting against the rare event, they should also enhance the commonplace. Thus, the technologies developed for homeland security should fit well within our physical and economic infrastructure, and our national habits. System performance must balance the risks associated with the threat against the impact of false alarms and impediments to our way of life.

http://www.whitehouse.gov/deptofhomeland/sect5.html

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National Preparedness: Integrating New and Existing Technology and Information Sharing Into an Effective Homeland Security Strategy,

by Randall A. Yim, director, national preparedness issues, before the Subcommittee on Technology and Procurement Policy, House Committee on Government Reform.
GAO-02-811T, June 7.
http://www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-02-811T

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Homeland Security: Key Elements to Unify Efforts Are Underway but Uncertainty Remains.

GAO-02-610, June 7.
http://www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-02-610

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Washington Post
June 11, 2002
Pg. 1

'Dirty Bomb' Plot Uncovered, U.S. Says

Suspected al Qaeda Operative Held as 'Enemy Combatant'

By Dan Eggen and Susan Schmidt, Washington Post Staff Writers

U.S. authorities announced yesterday that they had broken up a terrorist plot to detonate a radioactive "dirty bomb" in the United States, saying they had arrested a U.S.-born al Qaeda associate who was allegedly scouting targets after learning how to build such a device in Pakistan.

Abdullah al Muhajir, 31, a former street gang member born in Brooklyn as Jose Padilla, was transferred late Sunday to a naval brig in South Carolina after President Bush designated him an "enemy combatant," according to Attorney General John D. Ashcroft and other U.S. officials.

Al Muhajir had been under surveillance overseas by the CIA and FBI, and was arrested May 8 at O'Hare International Airport in Chicago after arriving on a flight from Pakistan, U.S. officials said. His sudden move to military jurisdiction came less than two days before he was scheduled to appear at a secret hearing in front of a civilian judge, officials said.

An associate involved in the alleged plot had been apprehended by Pakistani authorities along with al Muhajir. The Pakistanis released al Muhajir to allow U.S. investigators to track him on his way to the United States, sources said.

Bush administration officials characterized the case as the most specific plot disrupted by the U.S. government since Sept. 11, when al Qaeda hijackers crashed jetliners into the World Trade Center, the Pentagon and a Pennsylvania field, killing more than 3,000 people.

Al Muhajir is the third person with a claim of U.S. citizenship detained in connection with alleged terrorist activities. John Walker Lindh is charged with conspiring to kill Americans abroad, and Yaser Esam Hamdi, who was born in Louisiana, is being detained in Norfolk as an enemy combatant.

Al Muhajir's alleged plot marks the only terror plan targeted at the United States to come to light since the December arrest of British national Richard C. Reid. He was restrained by passengers on a transatlantic flight after he allegedly attempted to light explosives contained in his shoes.

Still, many senior U.S. officials took pains yesterday to describe the plan as rudimentary and unformed.

"There was not an actual plan," Deputy Defense Secretary Paul D. Wolfowitz said at a news conference yesterday. "We stopped this man in the initial planning stages."

Wolfowitz said that al Muhajir "indicated some knowledge of the Washington, D.C., area," but Wolfowitz and other officials played down early reports that the District was the intended terrorist target.

A spokesman for Mayor Anthony A. Williams (D) said the city received no evidence from a federal joint terrorism task force that al Muhajir was a threat.

Ashcroft, in a Moscow news conference held during a visit to Russia, said al Muhajir's arrest "disrupted an unfolding terrorist plot to attack the United States by exploding a radioactive dirty bomb."

"We know from multiple, independent and corroborating sources that Abdullah al Muhajir was closely associated with al Qaeda and that, as an al Qaeda operative, he was involved in planning future terrorist attacks on innocent American civilians in the United States," Ashcroft said.

Administration officials have come under considerable criticism in recent weeks for mishandling clues to the Sept. 11 attacks. They stressed yesterday that foiling the alleged plot involved substantial cooperation between the FBI, the CIA and other agencies.

A "dirty bomb" is a device that would combine conventional explosives with radioactive material. Although such devices may do limited damage if detonated, they could cause widespread panic, eventual cancers and other health problems, and a cleanup nightmare for authorities, experts said.

Al Muhajir had direct contact with al Qaeda lieutenant Abu Zubaida in 2001, and traveled to the Pakistani cities of Lahore and Karachi for research and debriefings on the plan, officials said. Zubaida, who is in U.S. custody overseas, provided the initial hints that led to the alleged plot, sources said.

Sources said al Muhajir had been held since May 8 under the same material witness statute that has been employed frequently since the Sept. 11 terror attacks. It recently has come under attack in federal court.

A Justice Department official said that al Muhajir can be held indefinitely an as enemy soldier under U.S. law, but that there are no plans to attempt to try him before a military tribunal. Such proceedings are not designed for U.S. citizens.

A former Latin Kings gang member in Chicago, al Muhajir served time in juvenile hall in connection with a gang killing and other incidents in Chicago. During a later stay in a Florida prison as an adult, he converted to a militant form of Islam, law enforcement sources said. Officials said he is married to a Middle Eastern woman, identified by one law enforcement source as an Egyptian.

Ashcroft and other administration officials alleged that while he was in Pakistan, al Muhajir researched radiological weapons and methods for wiring explosives. On several occasions in 2001 he met with senior al Qaeda leaders, they said.

In possession of a valid, and therefore valuable, U.S. passport, al Muhajir was sent back to the United States to conduct reconnaissance for the eventual detonation of a dirty bomb, officials said.

The disclosure of al Muhajir's arrest came after several weeks of warnings from Bush administration officials about possible attacks by followers of Osama bin Laden, including May 21 testimony from Defense Secretary Donald H. Rumsfeld that terrorists will "inevitably" obtain weapons of mass destruction.

"We have a man detained who is a threat to the country and . . . thanks to the vigilance of our intelligence-gathering and law enforcement, he is now off the street, where he should be," Bush said yesterday during a photo session in Washington with visiting Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon.

Wolfowitz, at a Washington news conference with Deputy Attorney General Larry Thompson and FBI Director Robert S. Mueller III, said that "our number one priority is to defend the American people from future attacks. To do that, we must root out those who are planning such attacks. We must find them and we must stop them, and when we have them in our control, we must be able to question them about plans for future attacks."

By transferring al Muhajir to the Naval Consolidated Brig in Charleston, S.C., investigators can continue seeking information from him with relatively little interference from a defense attorney, several officials said.

Zubaida, who has emerged as one of the United States's most important sources of information about possible al Qaeda plots, told interrogators about the alleged dirty bomb plan in general terms and did not name individuals, sources said.
Al Muhajir and his associate were not considered part of Zubaida's inner circle, officials said.
"He described this guy only generically, probably in a way he didn't expect would lead us to him," one senior official said. "But based on other information we had developed, we were able to track him down."
The CIA provided the principal information that led law enforcement to al Muhajir, sources said. The information included other interrogations and captured documents, but did not involve electronic intercepts or foreign intelligence services, two sources said.
In Pakistan, authorities recently arrested al Muhajir and one other associate, government sources said. Al Muhajir, who was detained for Pakistani immigration violations, was released and tricked into boarding a plane for the United States, where CIA and FBI operatives were watching his movements, several sources said.
"We were fully aware of his movements from the time he left Pakistan," one Justice Department official said. Another official said: "We had eyes on him the entire time."
Al Muhajir made one stop of undisclosed duration in Switzerland before arriving in Chicago on May 8, officials said. "This guy thought he was getting away," one U.S. official said. "He thought he escaped."
Had al Muhajir been kept in custody in Pakistan, the process of extraditing him would have complicated the investigation significantly, one official suggested. By trailing him, investigators could watch for other associates.
Officials declined to say yesterday whether anyone met al Muhajir at O'Hare.
At the airport, al Muhajir was first escorted to an examination area used by the U.S. Customs Service, which discovered $10,526 in undeclared currency, Customs officials said. Al Muhajir was interviewed, arrested and turned over to the FBI, officials said.
Al Muhajir was flown to New York under a material witness warrant and incarcerated at the Metropolitan Correctional Center in southern Manhattan, officials said. Prosecutors planned to have al Muhajir testify before a New York grand jury investigating terrorism.
But al Muhajir refused to cooperate, federal officials said.
Prosecutors scrambled to build a case against al Muhajir. Two foreign witnesses, in addition to Zubaida, had provided independent intelligence to U.S. officials about al Muhajir, but it was unclear whether that evidence would be admissible in a criminal proceeding, sources said.
After concluding that building a case would be difficult, prosecutors believed they were running out of time. They faced a secret hearing Tuesday before a judge, officials said, and turned in recent days to another option: transferring him to military custody.
On Sunday, prosecutors dropped the material witness warrant and withdrew a subpoena ordering al Muhajir to testify before the grand jury. After Bush signed a directive naming him as an enemy combatant, U.S. marshals escorted al Muhajir out of jail and turned him over to the military.
Staff writers Steve Fainaru, Barton Gellman and Colum Lynch in New York; Spencer S. Hsu and Bill Miller, research editor Margot Williams and researcher Lynn Davis in Washington contributed to this report.

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New York Times
June 11, 2002
Pg. 1

U.S. Says It Halted Qaeda Plot To Use Radioactive Bomb

By James Risen and Philip Shenon
WASHINGTON, June 10 — The Justice Department announced today that it had broken up a plot by Al Qaeda to detonate a radioactive bomb inside the United States by arresting an American citizen in the case.
"We have captured a known terrorist who was exploring a plan to build and explode a radiological dispersion device, or `dirty bomb,' in the United States," Attorney General John Ashcroft said in a televised announcement from Moscow, where he was meeting with Russian official on unrelated matters.
Mr. Ashcroft identified the arrested man as Abdullah al-Muhajir, 31, a former Chicago gang member who American officials said was born Jose Padilla in Brooklyn and raised as a Roman Catholic but who converted to Islam and began using a new name.

Mr. Padilla has been in custody since May 8, when he was arrested on a sealed material witness warrant at O'Hare International Airport in Chicago as he arrived on a flight from Zurich.

Senior government officials said Mr. Padilla had discussed the bomb plot with top Qaeda leaders in Pakistan and Afghanistan, among them Abu Zubaydah, the Osama bin Laden lieutenant who was captured in Pakistan in March and later told United States officials about the plan. But they also said Mr. Padilla had not obtained the materials to make such a device.

Mr. Zubaydah, the most senior Qaeda leader in custody, told his American interrogators that several Qaeda members had come to him late last December with a proposal to acquire and detonate a radiological device, a so-called dirty bomb. Mr. Zubaydah did not identify Mr. Padilla by name, but provided enough information to allow the Central Intelligence Agency to check with other sources — including documents seized in Afghanistan — to narrow the search to Mr. Padilla, officials said.

"We were able to figure out who Zubaydah was talking about, and then screen him and follow him," said an American intelligence official.

In New York City, where Mr. Padilla was held after his arrest until being transferred on Sunday to a military jail in South Carolina, a law enforcement official described Mr. Padilla as someone who tried to make inroads with terrorists after his conversion to Islam.

Other officials said that before he left Pakistan, Mr. Padilla was told by Al Qaeda leaders to fly to the United States to conduct reconnaissance for several possible plots, including the possibility of blowing up hotel rooms and gas stations.

But the plot outlined by United States officials today centered on a plan to carry out an attack using a bomb that uses conventional explosives to spew potentially lethal radioactive material across a wide area.

American intelligence officials cautioned that the plot had been in early planning stages and no time for the operation had been set. They said that there was also no evidence that Mr. Padilla or any other Qaeda operatives had obtained the materials needed to construct a dirty bomb.

"They didn't seem to think they would have trouble getting radiological materials, but they didn't have any of it," said one official.

Donna Newman, Mr. Padilla's lawyer in New York, said federal authorities had given her little information about the accusations against Mr. Padilla. She also expressed dismay that the government had suddenly transferred him to the military jail in South Carolina.

American officials said Al Qaeda's leadership was apparently intrigued by Mr. Padilla's being an American citizen who might have an easier time of gaining entry to the United States than other Qaeda members.

The announcement of the arrest seemed to suggest that the Bush administration had succeeded in executing the kind of aggressive preventive action that officials say they have concentrated on since Sept. 11.

The announcement could also prove a lift for the Federal Bureau of Investigation and Central Intelligence Agency, which have been under heavy criticism in Congress for missing potential warning signs last year that might have disrupted the the hijacking plot.

Agents picked up Mr. Padilla's trail after he and two other men were detained by Pakistani authorities on a passport violation in April, officials said. Mr. Padilla left Pakistan in early April and traveled from Switzerland to Egypt and then back to Switzerland.

F.B.I. agents secretly boarded his flight from Zurich to the United States to keep him under surveillance. But worried that Mr. Padilla might disrupt the Chicago-bound flight, agents asked airline security personnel in Zurich to inspect his luggage carefully and his personal effects, including his shoes.

"They checked to make sure his shoes weren't funky," said one official, referring to the case of Richard C. Reid, a British convert to Islam who was charged with a terrorist act after officials said he tried to detonate a shoe bomb on a Paris-to-Miami flight last December.

Mr. Padilla was arrested as soon as the flight touched down, officials said, because agents hoped to obtain his cooperation. A search revealed that he was carrying about $10,000.

The New York law enforcement official said, however, that Mr. Padilla had been uncooperative during his month in detention at the Metropolitan Corrections Center in downtown Manhattan.

The decision to make an immediate arrest appeared to be part of the shift since Sept. 11 from lengthy covert surveillance operations to intervention to prevent further terrorist attacks.

Today, Mr. Padilla was being held in a high security jail at the Charleston Naval Weapons Station in South Carolina. Bush administration officials said Mr. Padilla had been declared an enemy combatant, a status that makes it easier for the government to detain him without having to bring a criminal charge that would force it disclose sensitive intelligence sources.

There was also some question as to whether there was enough evidence, absent information gathered from intelligence sources, to bring a traditional criminal prosecution that could be won in court. That meant, officials said, that the best and perhaps only realistic alternative was to turn him over to military custody in which he could be held indefinitely.
Federal prosecutors said they announced the arrest today because they had faced a hearing scheduled for Tuesday when they could have been forced to decide whether to charge him formally with a crime.
The plot as explained by the authorities seemed to follow the outlines of a scenario that counterterrorism experts had long feared. They have predicted that a radioactive bomb would be easier for terrorists to obtain than a nuclear device.
Officials said Mr. Padilla met with Mr. Zubaydah in Afghanistan last December and raised with him then the possibility of a dirty bomb attack on the United States.
Mr. Padilla then traveled to Pakistan, where he received training from Al Qaeda in the wiring of explosives, intelligence officials said.
Mr. Padilla stayed at a Qaeda safe house in Lahore, Pakistan, for a time and conducted research on radiological devices on the Internet, officials said.
At Mr. Zubaydah's behest, Mr. Padilla also traveled to Karachi to discuss several possible plans, the officials said.
A senior administration official said Mr. Zubaydah was not the only Qaeda member in custody who had led them to find Mr. Padilla. "Abu Zubaydah was one of the sources, but not the only one," the official said. "It's a rather impressive variety of sources."
The official said Mr. Padilla had "left an amazing number of tracks around."

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Washington Post
June 11, 2002
Pg. 1

Arrest Shifts Focus To U.S. Sources Of Contaminants

By Barton Gellman, Washington Post Staff Writer
Long before the May 8 arrest of Abdullah al Muhajir, the U.S. government concluded that Osama bin Laden controls enough cesium, strontium or cobalt to mount a radiological attack in the United States. The problem for al Qaeda, analysts believed, was reaching America with the required crude device.
Yesterday's disclosures about al Muhajir, accused of conspiracy to build and detonate such a "dirty bomb," came amid a shift in thinking about the locus of greatest risk. Instead of smuggling in radioactive contaminants, counterterrorist sources said, al Qaeda may be planning to buy or steal them here.
The U.S. intelligence community, knowledgeable officials said, believes that bin Laden's modest cache of radioactive metals almost certainly remains in south and central Asia. No sign of the nuclear materials has been found by U.S. forces in Afghanistan, and analysts lean increasingly toward the view that bin Laden is unlikely to risk transporting such a scarce and valuable resource across U.S. borders.
Counterterrorist officials said, after al Muhajir's arrest was announced yesterday, that they are focusing their investigation on the theory that his plans relied on a domestic source of nuclear isotopes. A dirty bomb, known among specialists as a "radiological dispersion device," would use conventional explosives to fling those isotopes in an airborne plume of radioactive dust.
Because a dirty bomb's greatest impact is terror, specialists in and out of government said even small quantities of radioactive metal would serve al Qaeda's aim.
"It is much more likely they will acquire them in the United States if they want to use them here," said a senior official familiar with the analysis. "They will try to obtain them locally."
That assessment marks a significant shift in thinking about a threat the U.S. government has taken seriously for years. Most of the emphasis before now has been on the unraveling of the vast nuclear complex, civilian and military, of the former Soviet Union. Al Qaeda is known to have made substantial efforts to buy black market isotopes there.
For at least a year, government specialists have believed that those efforts succeeded. That consensus emerged months before Sept. 11 last year, when four dozen intelligence analysts converged on a classified facility in Chantilly, Va., just down Lee Road from the National Reconnaissance Office.

From early morning until late that night, the unusual gathering staged what one participant called a deadly serious "analytical game." Conferees in the Top Secret/Codeword exercise divided into two groups. The first made the strongest case it could, from evidence in hand, that bin Laden possessed the makings of a dirty bomb -- or worse, a device capable of producing an atomic detonation. The second group rebutted.

The doubters, officials said, did not convince themselves with any confidence. Even those who thought it improbable that al Qaeda already had an atomic bomb acknowledged that the evidence did not rule it out. And most agreed that bin Laden's organization had the wherewithal to build a radiological weapon.

After Sept. 11, The Washington Post has reported, the Bush administration rushed sophisticated sensors -- neutron flux detectors and gamma ray detectors -- to ports of entry and choke points around major targets such as Washington and New York. At the time, the Customs Service fielded about 4,000 pager-sized "personal radiation detectors" for use by inspectors.

President Bush also placed Delta Force, the nation's elite commando unit, on standby to seize control of nuclear materials that the sensors might detect. Although far from an impermeable cordon, the new deployments increased the risk to al Qaeda that a dirty bomb might be discovered before it could be used.

The administration continues to press the three national laboratories, led by the NIS-6 Division at Los Alamos, N.M., to address what one Energy Department report called "shortcomings in the ability of [detection] equipment to locate the target materials which if known by adversaries could be used to defeat the search equipment and/or procedures." Crash research and development programs include the use of neutron generators to "interrogate" suspicious objects and other technologies for long-range detection of alpha particles.

These defenses against the external threat reflect a history in which the most serious known breaches of nuclear security -- involving materials enriched for use in nuclear weapons, or large quantities of lesser isotopes -- have taken place overseas.

The National Intelligence Council, an umbrella organization of interagency analysts, reported to Congress in February that "weapons-grade and weapons-usable nuclear materials have been stolen from some Russian institutes" at least four times from 1992 to 1999. Beyond that, the report said, "we assess that undetected smuggling has occurred."

Hundreds of thefts have been reported of less threatening nuclear byproducts, incapable of atomic detonation but harmfully radioactive nonetheless. In November 1995, Chechen rebels demonstrated the risks involved when they placed a 33-pound package containing cesium, wrapped in yellow paper, on a bench in Moscow's Izmailovo Park. There were no explosives, but Chechen rebel field commander Shamil Basayev said he had enough materials left to cause "several mini-Chernobyls."

Two close calls overseas were also serious. On May 25, 1999, a Bulgarian inspector -- trained and equipped by U.S. Customs -- discovered 10 grams of weapons-grade uranium in the trunk of a Toyota sedan crossing the Danube River. And in March 2000, a 23-ton truckload of metals arrived at the Uzbek border from Kazakhstan with gamma rays pouring out of it at 100 times the permitted limit.

Plutonium and weapons-grade uranium are thought to be well secured in the United States, but that is not true of the lower-grade nuclear materials required for a dirty bomb.

Thousands of private companies and universities use cesium, strontium, cobalt or americium to treat cancer patients, irradiate food against harmful microbes, sterilize equipment, monitor the operation of oil wells and inspect welding seams. The quantities involved range from tiny traces of americium in smoke detectors to thick rods of cobalt, each a foot long, that are used by the score in a single food processing plant.

The Nuclear Regulatory Commission reported last month that U.S. companies have lost track of nearly 1,500 such radioactive parts since 1996, and more than half were never recovered. Up to 30,000 radioactive parts are believed to have been abandoned or thrown away, according to an Environmental Protection Agency estimate.

Of the thousands of nuclear sources still in use, or decommissioned to known storage sites, many are thought to be vulnerable to theft or black market sale. And few hospitals or food processing plants are secure enough to withstand an armed attack by people intent on seizing the materials by force.

Most of the lost and stolen items generate small amounts of radioactivity, but some are potent enough to be used in a dirty bomb.

As recently as March, an industrial gauge with a significant quantity of cesium turned up at a scrap-metal plant near Hertford, N.C., where someone had accidentally discarded it. That find led to the recovery of at least three other gauges that had been thrown away by a company in Maryland.

Henry Kelly, a physicist who directs the Federation of American Scientists, testified before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee that the cesium in the Hertford incident alone could contaminate "a swath about one mile long covering an area of 40 city blocks." He made the crucial, and controversial, assumption that a terrorist could mill the cesium into fine particles and disperse it efficiently with 10 pounds of TNT. "If the device was detonated at the

National Gallery of Art," he said, "the Capitol, Supreme Court and Library of Congress would exceed EPA contamination limits and might have to be abandoned for decades."
More worrisome to regulators was a 1998 incident in which thieves stole 19 tubes of medical cesium from a hospital in Greensboro, N.C., a crime investigators believe was committed with inside help. Police scoured the entire region with radiation-sensing aircraft but found no trace of the cesium. To this day, authorities have no idea where the material went, said Johnnie James, radiation emergency coordinator for North Carolina's Radiation Protection Section.
The biggest obstacle to handling industrial cesium is the same intense radiation that makes it useful in a bomb, said Arjun Makhijani, a nuclear-trained engineer and president of the Institute for Energy and Environmental Research in Takoma Park.
"It's not difficult to get a hold of this stuff, but if they don't know what they are doing, they could easily kill themselves," Makhijani said.
Until the recent turnabout by analysts, the U.S. government gave only modest attention to the risk that terrorists would build a dirty bomb domestically.
"Since Sept. 11, there has been no urgency about materials accounting and reporting -- and this should Priority No. 1," Makhijani said.
Staff writer Joby Warrick contributed to this report.

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New York Times
June 11, 2002

Rumsfeld Says Iraq Has Chemical Arms Ready

By Thom Shanker
MANAMA, Bahrain, June 10 — Defense Secretary Donald H. Rumsfeld said today that Iraq had already prepared chemical weapons for attack and was developing nuclear and biological arms. He rejected President Saddam Hussein's denials by telling hundreds of cheering American sailors and marines tonight that Mr. Hussein is "a world-class liar."
On the second stop of his tour of Persian Gulf states, Mr. Rumsfeld met with Bahrain's senior leaders to discuss fighting terror, including threats from Iraq, Defense Department officials said.
The Iraqi Foreign Ministry, in a statement timed with Mr. Rumsfeld's visit to the Persian Gulf, said on Sunday that Mr. Hussein's government had not possessed weapons of mass destruction since 1991, and was not now developing biological, chemical or nuclear arms.
"If you want to know a world-class liar, it's Saddam Hussein," Mr. Rumsfeld told the crowd of sailors and marines assigned to the United States Fifth Fleet who gathered at an outdoor pavilion near the harbor here. "He's lying. It's not complicated."
Before Mr. Rumsfeld's talks this morning in Kuwait, this afternoon here in Bahrain and Tuesday in Qatar, the official agenda included a range of military-to-military issues, but Mr. Hussein has been a constant presence.
In Kuwait this morning, Mr. Rumsfeld described the American assessment of Iraq's program for weapons of mass destruction.
"They have them, and they continue to develop them, and they have weaponized chemical weapons," he declared, adding that Iraq used chemical weapons in the 1980's against its own Kurdish population. "They've had an active program to develop nuclear weapons. It's also clear that they are actively developing biological weapons. I don't know what other kinds of weapons would fall under the rubric of weapons of mass destruction, but if there are more, I suspect they're working on them, as well."
No specific military operations were discussed during the talks in Kuwait with the emir, Sheik Jaber al-Ahmad al-Sabah, the crown prince and senior military officers, Defense Department officials said.
Mr. Rumsfeld and his hosts agreed today that Kuwait may send representatives to meet with about a dozen Kuwaitis captured during the war in Afghanistan and now held at the United States naval base at Guantánamo Bay, Cuba.
"The purpose of the visit clearly would be to assist in intelligence gathering and, second, to determine the extent to which there may be any law-enforcement interest with respect to those individuals," he said.

Mr. Rumsfeld was asked several times to assess the public reconciliation struck between Kuwait and Iraq at an Arab League summit meeting in March, and whether it caused the Bush administration worries about Kuwait, which was rescued from Mr. Hussein's forces in the Persian Gulf war in 1991.
Mr. Rumsfeld said the issue "is for Kuwait to make a judgment about."
"If I were asked for my advice," he added, "it would be like the lion inviting the chicken into the embrace. What good in the past have Iraqi representations of good will to their neighbors been? Precious little."
After arriving here, Mr. Rumsfeld met with Bahrain's king, Sheik Hamad Isa bin Sulman al-Khalifa, the crown prince and military officials.
He then visited some of the 4,225 American sailors and marines stationed here when he toured a mine-sweeper and a destroyer assigned to naval forces of the Central Command, which patrols waters from the Indian Ocean to the Red Sea.

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Washington Post
June 11, 2002
Pg. 17

Rumsfeld Says Hussein Lying About Weapons

By The Associated Press
MANAMA, Bahrain, June 10 -- Iraqi President Saddam Hussein is a "world-class liar" who is trying to fool the world into thinking he has no interest in weapons of mass destruction, Defense Secretary Donald H. Rumsfeld told U.S. troops today in this island nation in the Persian Gulf.
Addressing several hundred sailors and Marines at U.S. Navy Central Command headquarters, Rumsfeld left no doubt he believes Iraq is building stocks of nuclear, chemical and biological weapons in defiance of U.N. resolutions that ended the 1991 Persian Gulf War.
In emphatic tones, he noted a public assertion by Hussein's government that it has no weapons of mass destruction and is making no effort to acquire them.
"He's lying. It's not complicated," Rumsfeld said.
The Iraqi Foreign Ministry issued a statement Sunday asserting the government has neither made nor possessed weapons of mass destruction in more than a decade.
"Iraq has said on many occasions that it is not concerned with entering the mass destruction weapons club. . . . We left it in 1991," the official statement said.

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(Editor’s Note: For further information on the reports mentioned in article, please see hyperlinks following article.)
New York Times
June 11, 2002

Fear Itself Is The Main Threat Of A Dirty Bomb, Experts Say

By Matthew L. Wald
WASHINGTON, June 10 — A dirty bomb would be simple — an Oklahoma City truck bomb laced with a few pounds of something radioactive — but the death and destruction would be from the bomb part, not the dirty part, experts say.
The psychological damage, though, could be tremendous, they say, especially with a public confused about the difference between a nuclear bomb, which splits atoms to release tremendous amounts of energy and creates radioactive materials, and a radiological weapon, which would use a conventional explosive to disperse radioactive materials. Radioactive contamination could be measured in tiny quantities miles downwind of a dirty bomb.
"One of the terrorist's chief aims is to cause psychological effects; to induce fear in a population," said a report last October by the National Council on Radiation Protection. "Such fear is further compounded when invisible toxins,

such as radiation or radioactivity, are involved. People can neither see nor sense the presence of radiation, but they know that it is potentially hazardous."
The chairman of the committee that wrote the report, Dr. John W. Poston Sr., a professor of nuclear engineering at Texas A&M University, said an explosive dispersal of radioactive material would dilute it, making it almost impossible for a person to get a large enough radiation dose to cause acute illness.
But, Professor Poston said, "you can think of all kinds of things, people panicking, killing each other in automobiles, arguing over who has the right of way, crazy things that would have nothing to do with radioactivity but would be caused by psychological effects."
Another group, the Center for International and Strategic Studies, predicted the effects of a 4,000-pound TNT bomb explosion in front of the Smithsonian Air and Space Museum here, with a pound and a half of radioactive cesium. It could contaminate an area in which tens of thousands of people live and work, but the annual dose rate would be small in most of the area, adding only about 25 percent to the amount that most people already receive from natural and artificial sources, according to the model.
But it would make people reluctant to be in a contaminated area, said Dr. Philip Anderson, director of the domestic security initiative at the center.
"The dirty bomb is something that is so easy to execute, I could go so far as to say I believe that one person who has done their homework, acting alone today, could do significant damage, certainly more psychological than real," Dr. Anderson said.
Others disagreed that it would be easy, citing practical difficulties. Sources used in food irradiation, for example, weigh 10,000 pounds, including shielding. Removed from shielding, they weigh a few pounds, but would emit enough radiation to kill a terrorist before he could attach it to conventional explosives.
A nuclear physicist, Arjun Makhijani, president of the Institute for Energy and Environmental Research, said radioactive materials for a dirty bomb would be "difficult to handle, and difficult to disperse radiologically," but could cause "terrible economic damage."
There are about two million radiation sources in this country, in the hands of 21,000 licensees, used for purposes that include irradiating cancer patients and checking the thickness of asphalt, according to the Nuclear Regulatory Commission. There were 107 reports of lost or stolen sources in the six months ending March 31, commission data show. In recent years the annual rate of reports has been about 375.

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The NCRP Releases Report No. 138, *Management of Terrorist Events Involving Radioactive Material* (News Release)

http://users.erols.com/ncrp/138press.html

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CSIS Addresses The Threat of a "Dirty Nuclear Weapon"

The Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) developed a terrorist attack scenario and a one-day workshop to address a plausible - large - cross-jurisdictional crisis in Washington, DC. The overall purpose of the workshop was to help frame the planning requirement (end state), for the Metropolitan Washington Council of Governments (COG) led crisis-planning effort, by identifying some of the key issues and friction points to be resolved in the event of a detonation of a Radiological Device in downtown Washington, D.C.
(For further information on the conclusions of the workshop please contact Mark Schoeff at 202.775-3242, mschoeff@csis.org)

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Washington Post
June 11, 2002
Pg. 11

Panic Could Magnify Harm, Experts Say

Governments Working to Curb Spread of Radioactive Matter in Case of Attack

By Bill Miller and Guy Gugliotta, Washington Post Staff Writers

If terrorists set off a "dirty bomb" in downtown Washington, the number of fatalities would probably be fairly low but the psychological impact could cause wide-scale panic that would clog hospitals and roadways, interfere with rescue efforts and create a long-term economic crisis, government officials and outside specialists said yesterday.

Instead of staying put and waiting for help, people in the contaminated area will be tempted to go off on their own, either to hospitals or their families, raising the possibility of spreading the danger, according to those who have studied the issue.

"We've never had to address an issue like this," said Phil Anderson, a senior fellow at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, which conducted a mock exercise for Washington area government officials involving a dirty bomb scenario in March.

Anderson and others said yesterday's announcement that U.S. authorities had arrested an al Qaeda operative who was planning to detonate a crude radiological weapon underscored the importance of not only preparing federal, state and local governments for such an attack but also educating the public about the consequences.

A dirty bomb is a relatively simple device in which a bomber combines conventional high explosives with some sort of radioactive material and detonates it. The blast spreads the radioactive material over the explosion's immediate area.

A nuclear explosion, by contrast, is a completely different phenomenon, in which radioactive material is compressed or combined until it reaches "critical mass," triggering a chain reaction accompanied by a spectacular and catastrophic release of energy.

Michael Levi, a physicist with the Federation of American Scientists, questioned whether federal, state and local governments would be able to handle the evacuation and decontamination of a large area and the medical demands of a frightened public.

"We haven't had any dress rehearsals for this, and we won't ever have any," Levi said. "If our medical personnel aren't trained to separate the immediate radiation sicknesses from psychosomatic symptoms, our public health systems will be overwhelmed."

Mohammad Akhter, executive director of the American Public Health Association, said the public's reaction would be the key. "Medically, professionally speaking we are ready," he said. "It's the terror part, the fear part you really need to prepare for."

Moreover, detonation of a dirty bomb would require a cleanup of the contaminated area, something that would likely be extremely costly, Anderson said. It could also cause long-term economic problems if people began pulling out of the city or workplaces, he said.

Although experts do not discount the dangers of a dirty bomb, several pointed out that the hazards are relatively modest compared with those that could accompany a biological or chemical attack, and do not compare with the potential damage wrought by a nuclear weapon.

"You can hurt a couple of people badly if you leave the radiation source intact, and you can panic a lot of people without hurting them if you sprayed it over a big area," said University of Rochester radiation expert Andrew Karam. "But I haven't figured out how you can hurt a lot of people in a big area."

Should a dirty bomb explode, Karam suggested, the largest number of deaths and injuries would occur as an immediate result of the explosion. But, ultimately, Karam added, "The biggest source of casualties will be ignorance, because people will be needlessly flooding emergency rooms, getting in car accidents or having heart attacks."

Yet, Karam and others said, the fallout dangers from a dirty bomb are relatively slight, with sickness likely to develop only after spending years in an exposed area.

Although the 1985 nuclear accident at Chernobyl in the Soviet Union may eventually have killed 2,000 people, Karam said, "the level of exposure was orders of magnitude higher" than anything envisioned in a dirty bomb.

"In dirty bombs . . . for the vast majority of people, there is time to respond," said Norman Coleman, head of the radiation oncology sciences program at the National Cancer Institute. "It's almost common sense. You get inside, get clean and get the chemicals off you."

Coleman said a dirty bomb might produce a radioactive isotope of iodine, a common component of fallout that is readily absorbed by the human thyroid gland. The effects can be completely blocked by taking potassium iodide tablets, which saturate the thyroid with nonradioactive iodine. Federal officials now are reviewing how widely they should distribute potassium iodide pills to citizens as a precaution.
A small percentage of people may suffer from cancer in the future, Coleman said, but this may only occur after years of exposure.
Even though there is no comparison between the heat and blast effects of dirty bombs and nuclear weapons, both bring radioactive contamination. Taking care of this will be the chief task of those who respond to a dirty bomb, the specialists said.
And the United States has 60 years of experience studying and thinking about nuclear radiation. "We know an awful lot about it," said Richard L. Garwin, senior fellow for science and technology at the Council on Foreign Relations.
Scientists studying dirty bombs suppose that a terrorist would use radioactive isotopes of cobalt or cesium -- found in food irradiation or medical equipment, or the heavy metal americium, used in oil prospecting.
Federal officials maintained yesterday that they are well prepared to deal with the detonation of a dirty bomb and able to assist local emergency personnel with medications, emergency medical care and sophisticated technical expertise.
Some officials acknowledged that there remains plenty of room for improvement. "With the exception of the areas around nuclear power plants, radiological preparedness has not caught up to where we are at with chemical preparedness and even biological preparedness in many locations," said Jerome M. Hauer, director of the Office of Public Health Preparedness in the Department of Health and Human Services. He added that the pace has recently picked up.
In Washington, the federal and local governments have been training for years to deal with dirty bombs.
In May 2000, the FBI led an exercise that simulated radiological attacks at St. Elizabeth's Hospital in Southeast Washington and US Airways Arena in Landover. The District tested its response to a similar explosion over Union Station last year, and that was followed by this March's workshop by the Center for Strategic and International Studies, which involved a hypothetical dirty bomb over the Mall.
The D.C. government is spending $18 million in emergency federal aid on protective gear, decontamination equipment and radiation sensors in every neighborhood, and millions more to train several thousand firefighters, police, hazardous-material units and health officials to test for nonconventional threats in unusual events.
Staff writer Spencer S. Hsu contributed to this report.

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International Herald Tribune
June 11, 2002

Authorities Try To Imagine 'Dirty Bomb' In Washington

By Brian Knowlton, International Herald Tribune
WASHINGTON -- How exactly would a "dirty bomb" attack affect Washington? How severe would casualties be, and how well prepared are the authorities to deal with it?
Just three months ago, the Center for Strategic and International Studies, a Washington analysis group, developed a scenario of such an attack, drawing on earlier federal studies, and then invited representatives of city, state and federal emergency-response agencies to run through the scenario in a one-day workshop.
Its conclusions are sobering, though strikingly less so because of projected casualties than because of the enormous psychological costs such an attack would impart, and the huge ripple effects of panic and chaos at the heart of the U.S. government.
The scenario: It is May 23 of this year, a warm and clear but breezy day. Suddenly, on a street outside a main entrance to the popular Air and Space Museum, on the National Mall running through official Washington, a large explosive device is detonated. The time is 10:30.
The museum is busy with visiting school groups; there are perhaps 15,000 tourists and federal workers in the immediate area. Congress is in session, and the president is in the White House. The explosion - from a yellow school bus parked on Independence Avenue (later found to have been stolen in Missouri and repainted) is felt and heard throughout downtown Washington. There are large numbers of immediate casualties in the area. Depending on the size of the explosion, they could number as many as in the Sept. 11 attacks. Much of the museum is destroyed.

Several vehicles are destroyed, and three federal office buildings are damaged. A train is derailed.
The emergency response is relatively quick, though responders come expecting a conventional explosion. An emergency triage center is quickly set up. The police close streets for 10 blocks around.
Congress, meeting just blocks away, suspends business. Most federal offices close, but the flood of thousands of people into the Metro rail system, which is operating on off-peak hours, causes congestion and panic. (Some of the fleeing people, it turns out, may be spreading radioactive contamination outside the immediate area.)
Emergency response crews, particularly hazardous-material units, are now much more likely than in the past to have radiation-detection devices, and within five to 20 minutes, hazardous radiation is detected.
The news media pick up these reports, and there are rumors that the bomb may have been a failed nuclear device.
Unlike a one-kiloton nuclear explosion, which would have affected the entire city, spreading contamination over a 5-mile radius, this turns out to have been a "dirty bomb": 4,000 pounds of TNT surrounded by radioactive cesium-137.
One-fourth of the city is affected by the plume of radioactivity.
The presence of radioactivity seriously slows rescue efforts. The first echelon of workers near the Air and Space Museum can remain there no more than 90 minutes before reaching their maximum safe level of contamination. They have to be rotated out. Within a few days, all available workers in the area may have reached that maximum level.
The second wave of emergency responders will be equipped with bulky protective gear, but this gear has to be replaced, and suits soon run short.
People and traffic continue to stream from the city; with street closures, congestion becomes serious.
Hospitals are overwhelmed. A morgue is set up near the museum.
A week later, thousands of people are still refusing to work in the District of Columbia. Tourism comes to a standstill. Parents refuse to send their children to school.
Buildings in a several-block area require decontamination; debris require safe disposal. The cleanup costs are enormous.
Wastewater risks contaminating the Potomac watershed. The impact on the insurance industry, and on local business and real estate values, is severe.
"The device itself would kill people - but it's isolated," said Phil Anderson, who helped run the workshop. "The real impact is the psychological impact, on the entire nation."

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USA Today
June 11, 2002
Pg. 1

'Dirty Bomb' Threatens U.S. With Near Terror Attack

By Bill Nichols, Mimi Hall and Peter Eisler, USA Today

WASHINGTON — A potential threat U.S. intelligence agencies have worried about for years became chillingly real Monday, and a new phrase entered the post-Sept. 11 vocabulary of many average Americans: dirty bomb. The announcement by the Bush administration that a suspected al-Qaeda operative has been arrested for allegedly plotting a possible attack on the United States with a radioactive "dirty bomb" heightened fears of a new kind of terrorist attack — one that might not kill many people but would create fear, panic and huge financial losses. Such a weapon, technically known as a "radiological dispersion device," combines an explosive charge with virtually any type of radioactive material. It is relatively simple to assemble. There are tens of thousands of radiation sources that would suffice, from high-grade material used in nuclear power plants to isotopes present in hospital X-ray machines.
Former CIA officer Robert Baer says French police made arrests and seized a quantity of enriched plutonium, a possible component of a dirty bomb, earlier this year in Val de Fleury, a Paris suburb home to many North African Muslim immigrants. "The stuff is out there, and now we know they can get their hands on it," he says. "The future is here, I'm afraid."
Nuclear experts say it's essential to point out what this kind of weapon will not do. A dirty bomb will not kill the tens of thousands of people who would die from a nuclear explosion. Dozens, or perhaps hundreds, might be killed in a dirty bomb attack. For most in the immediate vicinity, the health threat would be long-term: increased odds of contracting cancer.

"The truth is, you have to start with a boatload of radioactive material in a dirty bomb for the health risk to the population to be significant," says Jonathan Links of the Johns Hopkins School of Public Health in Baltimore, a past head of the Society of Nuclear Medicine. "The real threat of a dirty bomb is psychological."

In terms of immediate casualties, a dirty bomb is "more on par with a natural catastrophe, a bad fire," says Bruce Blair, president of the Center for Defense Information.

In terms of how large an area would be contaminated by radiation, the damage would depend on the type and quantity of radioactive material. The contamination could dissipate in weeks, or it could render an area uninhabitable for decades. Abnormal levels of radiation would be spewed tens of miles in a worst-case scenario. More likely, experts say, the evacuation area would be a few dozen city blocks.

But Blair and others warn that even a low-tech dirty bomb using small amounts of dynamite and radioactive material probably would accomplish one of the chief goals of terrorism — creating widespread fear and panic.

The economic effects would be profound. Residents, fearing radiation exposure, undoubtedly would flee the city, and businesses might be reluctant to reopen, even after the all-clear is given.

Few people would be expected to die from radiation, but those nearby who survived the explosion might suffer radiation-poisoning effects such as nausea, vomiting and diarrhea. In the following weeks, their immune systems would decline as well because radiation kills bone marrow. Over the long term, survivors would see a higher risk of cancer than normal. Cases of leukemia would crop up within two years, and other cancers would take as long as 15 years to develop from radiation-damaged cells.

Poisoned buildings

Experts say the problem with decontamination efforts is that radioactive particles have to be removed; they can't be washed or blown away. In the event of an attack in downtown Washington, D.C., decontamination could ultimately mean the demolition of key government buildings or even national monuments.

"What we're looking at, we're looking at tearing down a bunch of stuff," says David Albright of the Institute for Science and International Policy.

In testimony before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee in March, Federation of American Scientists President Henry Kelly said a dirty bomb attack on New York City "would result in losses of potentially trillions of dollars."

In one scenario studied by the federation, the detonation in Manhattan of a dirty bomb, using a piece of cobalt stolen from a food-irradiation plant, would spread contamination over an area of about 300 city blocks and render most of the city uninhabitable for decades. However, federation scientists note that obtaining such a potent radiological source and using it effectively would be very difficult.

The federation also studied an attack in Washington, D.C., involving a dirty bomb that used 10 pounds of TNT to disperse a pea-size piece of cesium from a medical gauge — a far more easily obtained radiation source. In that scenario, contamination spread from a detonation site on the Mall to the Capitol, the Supreme Court and the Library of Congress.

People in those areas, however, would have only slightly elevated chances of developing cancer because only a small amount of cesium would be involved. Within five city blocks, the chances of developing a fatal cancer because of the attack would be one in 1,000. Beyond that, the chances would be one in 10,000.

Another model developed by the Center for Strategic and International Studies, a Washington think tank, found more disturbing results, in large part because it assumed an attack using a cesium bomb with a far larger amount of explosives — about 4,000 pounds — in an attack on Washington's Mall.

The study projected hundreds of deaths, primarily among those killed instantly because they were close to the explosion. This scenario also found devastating long-term economic effects.

Shutting down Washington

"Fear of radiation would drive away residents, tourists and businesses," CSIS suggested. "There would also be tremendous costs associated with the cleanup."

The CSIS study postulated that an empty school bus near the National Air and Space Museum would be blown up with a dirty bomb. The blast would damage the nearby Department of Education and Department of Health and Human Services offices, as well as the Federal Aviation Administration building.

In the aftermath, official Washington would be virtually shut down. Airports would be closed. Congress would go into recess. Most downtown traffic would be rerouted, and federal workers would be sent home. The city's subway system would be quickly overwhelmed. Rescue workers would have difficulty treating victims because of the fear of radiation exposure. Ultimately, the president might declare martial law in Washington.

What terrorists can do

U.S. officials have known for years that Osama bin Laden and his al-Qaeda network have been attempting to obtain weapons of mass destruction. Earlier intelligence work has been buttressed by the trove of information U.S. forces have found in Afghanistan, such as crude diagrams on how to make nuclear bombs.

Obtaining or building an actual nuclear bomb would be extremely difficult. There has never been a confirmed theft or loss of a ready-to-use nuclear weapon from any of the nuclear states: the United States, Britain, China, France, Russia, India, Pakistan and Israel. Building a bomb would present a steep technical challenge and would require terrorists to acquire weapons-grade nuclear material.

A dirty bomb, however, could be built with an amount of radioactive material that could fit into a measuring cup — material that is all too plentiful throughout the USA.

The Nuclear Regulatory Commission said last month that about 835 devices containing radioactive material have disappeared around the nation in the past five years. But the devices range widely in potency. Some elements, such as cobalt, emit gamma particles, which can penetrate the skin and cause almost immediate cellular damage and, in sufficient exposure, death. Others are dangerous only if particles are inhaled, and some are relatively benign. What's more, each radioactive element has a different half-life, meaning each takes a different amount of time to decay to the point where it no longer poses any danger.

Because an effective dirty bomb requires more potent radioactive elements, assembling such a device carries its own set of risks.

Two of the most common radiological sources that might be used in such a bomb are cobalt 60 and cesium 137, Both are used in medical equipment, such as X-ray machines, and food-irradiation plants. Though used widely, both elements are highly radioactive and, if not properly shielded, could kill a person assembling a bomb in a matter of minutes.

"The least-difficult materials to acquire generally are the hardest to handle," says Arjun Makhijani of the Institute for Energy and Environmental Research. "You need special training to handle these materials, or they will kill you."

If a would-be terrorist removed the shielding used to contain such elements for commercial use, he might not live long enough to build, much less place, a bomb. Conversely, if a weapon were designed around a shielded radiation source, it would be much more difficult to calculate how much explosive would be needed to effectively disperse the material.

Still, while obtaining radioactive material and building an effective dirty bomb is far from easy, most experts say the job is well within the means of a committed terrorist with proper training.

With that in mind, the Bush administration has ramped up its protection efforts since the attacks on Sept. 11:

* U.S. Customs officials at ports of entry have been equipped with Geiger counters that detect radioactivity.
* U.S. officials say the Nuclear Emergency Support Team, a unit based in the Department of Energy, conducts periodic searches for dirty bombs in major U.S. cities.
* Local officials also are mapping responses to the possible use of weapons of mass destruction, including dirty bombs.

Cities are preparing

Dozens of cities are responding to the new threat by holding drills to determine how emergency officials would respond to an attack with a weapon of mass destruction.

In Fort Wayne, Ind., for example, city officials are working with a private firm to map possible terrorist sites. The idea came after the Columbine High School shootings in 1999, when police had to call in the architect of the school to get a copy of the blueprint and figure out how to isolate the shooters inside the building.

Fort Wayne Mayor Graham Richard said the city is mapping government buildings and a water treatment plant. "We're not just playing to the fear of terrorism," he says. "Everything we're doing is just good public policy."

A top government official with knowledge of plans to protect the nation from and respond to a nuclear or radiological attack says so far there's no new massive effort against dirty bombs underway.

Plans to handle such an attack were developed during the Cold War, the official said, and are being "reinvigorated following what was a lovely hiatus" between the end of the Cold War and 9/11.

Most of the plans are highly classified, he said. "Is there a lot of new stuff being done? Yeah. But we're not starting from scratch."

The official said the response to a nuclear or radiological attack would be essentially the same as that for any major natural disaster. But in response to the attacks last fall, officials from the federal government and the states are focusing more on new technology to detect such devices and to protect chemical and nuclear plants.

Businesses get involved

Private firms also are helping plan for a dirty bomb attack. Former acting CIA director Jack Devine, now the president of The Arkin Group LLC, helps businesses prepare.

His company designs systems to help companies — most of his clients are financial services companies — protect their ventilation systems from chemical and biological attacks. He's also looking into providing "safe havens," or protected rooms in which employees could ride out an attack and wait for a radioactive cloud, for example, to disperse.

Shane Connor, a Gonzales, Texas, entrepreneur who sells survival gear on the Internet, says his business has exploded since Sept. 11.
He sells fallout shelters, radiation-detection devices, survival guides and potassium iodide tablets, which can be taken after a radiological attack to help prevent thyroid cancer.
Connor started the small, family-run business in 1999. He says it had about a dozen orders on a good day, mostly from survivalists. Now, he says, he has eight employees and takes about 120 orders a day, many of them from doctors and hospitals.
The federal government called him for 300,000 of the non-prescription pills, which are now being stockpiled in communities near nuclear plants. If a city is hit with a nuclear or radiological device, "we'll be sold out within 24 hours," he says. "There aren't enough tablets produced now to cover 1% of the population."
Connor says demand for detection devices also has skyrocketed because people are beginning to understand that "the danger areas can change as quickly as the wind" if a radiological or nuclear device is set off. He's got about 100,000 of the devices in stock, but he says they're being snapped up fast by city officials and private citizens.
"We're kind of on our own doing what the government should be doing," he says.
Contributing: Dan Vergano, Richard Willing

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New York Times
June 11, 2002

Japan: Koizumi Backs Aide After A-Bomb Remarks

Despite strong criticism in Parliament, Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi said he would not consider firing his chief cabinet secretary for suggesting that Japan could soon consider acquiring nuclear weapons. Yasuo Fukuda had told reporters that Japan's self-imposed ban on nuclear weapons could be changed as easily as the Constitution, which governing-party lawmakers say should be amended to allow Japan to field a regular army rather than just a self-defense force. Mr. Koizumi, at a special session of a parliamentary committee, said his cabinet planned no changes concerning the nuclear ban.
--Howard W. French (NYT)

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Moscow Times
June 11, 2002
Pg. 4

Nerve Gas Denial

MOSCOW (AP) -- The head of Russia's radiation, chemical and biological defense troops denied Monday that Soviet troops could have left chemical weapons at an Uzbek base now being used by U.S. troops.
U.S. military officials said Sunday that traces of nerve agents and mustard gas were found at the Khanabad air base. They said the contamination was thought to be from chemical weapons stored there by the Soviet Union.
"In accordance with international agreements, the troops have long been rid of poisonous substances," Colonel General Viktor Kholstov told the Interfax-Military News Agency. "They are kept at special storage installations."

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Philadelphia Inquirer
June 11, 2002

Bush To Allies: Help Fight Spread Of Weapons

By Warren P. Strobel, Inquirer Washington Bureau

WASHINGTON - The United States is lobbying its European allies and Japan to spend $10 billion to prevent terrorists from gaining access to nuclear, chemical and biological materials dispersed across the former Soviet Union.
That money, spread over the next decade, would roughly match what the United States is expected to spend on a range of protections, including better security at Russian weapons sites, disposal of weapons-grade nuclear materials, and destruction of chemical-arms stocks.
The nuclear attacks that worry experts are far more devastating than the "dirty bomb" at the heart of a plot that U.S. authorities uncovered last month and publicized yesterday. A "dirty bomb" is a conventional bomb combined with radioactive waste and generally is far less deadly than other weapons of mass destruction.
The U.S. initiative is an attempt to transform what has been primarily an American preoccupation into a global priority. It will be on the agenda when President Bush meets with the leaders of the G-8 - the world's seven wealthiest nations, plus Russia. The meeting will be in Calgary, Alberta, on June 26-27.
So far, Bush's plan for a cooperative global effort to deal with the threat that some of this material could fall into terrorists' hands has been met with praise from Washington's foreign partners - but no hard offers of cash.
The United States spends roughly $1 billion per year on "threat reduction" programs. Outside experts have said that amount is woefully inadequate.
"The problem is the Europeans, the Japanese have been operating at a fraction of that speed for the last decade," a senior State Department official said yesterday.
"The object of this is to get additional, new money to meet legitimate, bona fide requirements," the official added. .
Worldwide stockpiles of separated plutonium and highly enriched uranium, the key ingredients of nuclear weapons, total nearly 450 metric tons (about 500 tons) and 1,700 metric tons (1,870 tons), respectively, according to a report last month by experts at Harvard University.
Along with the United States, Russia and France, members of the G-8 are Canada, Italy, Germany, Britain and Japan.
Japan has made no decisions about how much it will contribute, an embassy spokeswoman said.
Matthew Bunn, one of the authors of the Harvard report, said Bush was right to insist that others share the burden.
"Insecure nuclear material anywhere is a threat to everyone everywhere," he said.
But Bunn said the initiative was "very unlikely to succeed as currently framed" because it assumes U.S. spending will stay the same, while the Europeans and Japanese increase theirs by roughly a factor of 20.
"Both the Russians and the Europeans are hedging their bets," acknowledged the State Department official.
Bush initially proposed cutting "threat reduction" programs in the former Soviet Union, and some of his aides questioned their value. Congress boosted funding after the Sept. 11 attacks.
The White House has proposed spending slightly more than $1 billion in fiscal 2003, roughly the same as this year.
The Harvard report called that amount far too little, noting that it is a fraction of the $38 billion allocated to homeland security.
The U.S. initiative also seeks more cooperation from Moscow, particularly in providing assurances about how the funds are spent and providing access and legal immunity to foreign disarmament experts. Disputes over access and liability have held up joint projects in the past, sometimes for years.
While U.S. officials blame the Russians, "there's enough blame to go around on both sides," Bunn said.

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Baltimore Sun
June 11, 2002

Lawsuit To Try To Block ABM Treaty Withdrawal

A group of House Democrats, led by Ohio Rep. Dennis Kucinich, plans to file a lawsuit today to block the Bush administration from withdrawing from the 1972 Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty.
Kucinich's office said the lawsuit will ask a federal district court to issue a temporary restraining order to stop the withdrawal, scheduled to go into effect Thursday, six months after President Bush announced his plans to leave the treaty.

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Albuquerque Journal
June 8, 2002
Pg. 1

Nuke Bunker-Bomb Faces Delay

Bingaman Says New Weapon Not Needed

By Miguel Navrot, Journal Staff Writer

Development of a ground-boring nuclear bomb intended to destroy buried targets could be put off until next year.

In March, Pentagon and Energy Department officials had directed Los Alamos and Lawrence Livermore national laboratories to compete in designing the weapon. The Senate Armed Services Committee agreed in May to wait for approval for the Robust Nuclear Earth Penetrator, a so-called "bunker buster" bomb.

But committee language added to the Senate version of the 2003 Defense Authorization bill sidelines weapon development and calls on Pentagon officials to justify the bomb's needs by early next year.

Sen. Jeff Bingaman, D-N.M., an Armed Services Committee member and chief opponent of the bunker buster, said the Bush administration hasn't done enough explaining to Congress on the need for a new nuclear bomb. Hitting and destroying underground targets can be accomplished with conventional, non-nuclear weapons, Bingaman said.

Energy officials have described the proposed bunker buster as having a relatively low-yield explosion for a nuclear weapon.

"I do not believe we should be considering other new classes of smaller and simpler ... devices against non-nuclear states," Bingaman said.

Sen. Pete Domenici, R-N.M., a bomb backer, said in a statement that the project could be approved this year when House and Senate leaders meet to finalize the authorization.

"Unfortunately, the Senate Armed Services committee has chosen to abandon any chance to explore the development of another weapon in the war against terrorism, which the bunker buster might represent," Domenici said. "Given the current makeup of the Senate, I suspect any attempt to restore this project would be unsuccessful."

Development plans call for Los Alamos to modify the B61 bomb, which has seen nearly a dozen modifications over three decades. Lawrence Livermore would focus on the B83 hydrogen bomb.

Arms control advocates have criticized the bunker buster proposal as a step backward for the United States in post-Cold War nuclear posture especially as the White House tries to intervene between quarreling nuclear powers Pakistan and India.

"We're off around the world, trying to stop terrorists from acquiring weapons of mass destruction. We are trying to prevent nuclear war in South Asia," said Michael Levi, a director with the Washington, D.C., think tank Federation of American Scientists. "Yet at the same time, whether intentionally or not, we're sending some bad signals."

John Isaacs, president of Council for a Livable World, said developing such a weapon goes counter to current U.S. policy of reducing nuclear stockpiles. He also questioned the need to bring nuclear bombs into combat situations.

"First of all, a nuclear bomb is a nuclear bomb. You drop a nuclear bomb, even if it's supposed to go partially underground, it's still going to destroy an awful lot of civilians that are nearby," Isaacs said.

Testifying in February before the Senate Armed Services Committee, Energy Department Undersecretary Gen. John Gordon said turning existing bombs into "special-purpose weapons" such as an earth penetrator could act as a deterrence against future enemies seeking to build their own nuclear stockpiles.

A 2001 Pentagon report concluded that the military has just one earth-penetrating weapon, and it cannot survive penetration into hardened surfaces.

Levi noted that, while the United States has no weapon to destroy buried targets with a single strike, existing bombs can be used instead.

"Would it be more effective to seal off the entrances to a big cave complex with conventional weapons than it would be to drop a few massive nuclear weapons on that complex? Absolutely," Levi said.

Funding and authorization could be restored for the project this summer, Isaacs said, when the full Senate votes on the bill. Afterward, lawmakers from both the House and Senate will meet to amend differences before authorization is given to President Bush for approval.

Although the House version of the bill doesn't directly give the $15.5 million for the bomb the Bush administration seeks, it doesn't directly prevent the project from going forward.

Senate support for the weapon largely fell along party lines during committee talks, and outnumbered Republicans failed to attract bipartisan approval for the administration's wishes.

Currently, little work on the project is being done at Lawrence Livermore and Los Alamos, said National Nuclear Security Administration spokeswoman Lisa Cutler. A feasibility study has been authorized, although it is expected to take "several years" to complete, Cutler said

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