

Opening Statement for
Senator Carl Levin
Before
Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations
on
Border Security and Nuclear Smuggling

March 28, 2006

I commend the Chairman for his leadership in focusing this Subcommittee's attention on the smuggling of nuclear and radiological materials across international borders, which is a real and ongoing threat to the national security of the United States. The International Atomic Energy Agency has estimated that as of the end of December 2004, there have been approximately 662 known attempts to smuggle nuclear or radiological materials across borders worldwide. These efforts are the ones that have been discovered. Logic dictates that many other attempts have been made and may have succeeded -- just how many is unknown.

The vulnerability of the United States to this threat is clear. The Government Accountability Office will testify today that, on two occasions during the last year, using personnel posing as importers, it managed to transport radioactive sources across our nation's borders. GAO's ease in moving these materials into the United States should be an alarming wake-up call to the Department of Homeland Security and to all Americans about the extent of our vulnerability.

Smuggling nuclear and radiological materials presents two distinct threats to U.S. national security. The first and the most serious threat is that weapons grade nuclear material in quantities sufficient to build an improvised nuclear explosive device are smuggled undetected into U.S. territory. An improvised nuclear device constructed and detonated by individuals with technical knowledge could result in massive casualties and widespread physical and economic damage.

The second threat is smuggled radiological materials which are incorporated into a dirty bomb which, when detonated, could cause widespread contamination. Immediate casualties resulting from a dirty bomb would probably be those killed or injured as a result of the explosion itself. A secondary consequence would be that the radiological material would likely contaminate a large area and result in major economic damage, disruption, and an expensive cleanup.

These serious consequences demand that serious effort be taken to prevent nuclear and radiological materials from falling into the hands of terrorists, criminals, or other non-state actors.

Since the fall of the Soviet Union, the Departments of Energy, Defense and State have worked to secure and consolidate nuclear and radiological materials in Russia and the States of the former Soviet Union. More recently, the United States, Russia and the International Atomic Energy Agency, have expanded their efforts to address radiological and nuclear materials at risk around the world. Governor Kean notes in his prepared testimony a concern about the slow rate at which these nuclear weapons and materials have been secured. The data suggests that it will take another fourteen years before the material in just the former Soviet Union is fully secured.

In 1998, after recognizing the possibility that materials could be stolen or illegally diverted, even from secure sites, DOE, DOD and the DOS, working with Customs, initiated the Second Line of Defense program to detect and interdict nuclear and radiological materials at border crossings. These are the programs which will be discussed today.

More recently, the Department of Homeland Security has worked to improve U.S. capabilities to detect and interdict nuclear and radiological materials at U.S. land borders and seaports, and initiated new programs, such as the Container Security Initiative (CSI), and the Customs Trade Partnership Against Terrorism (C-TPAT), which will be the subject of Thursday's hearing.

Today, we need to understand the nature of the threat, including who is working to smuggle these materials into the United States and elsewhere, where is the material coming from, where are the vulnerabilities and greatest risks, what is being done, and what more can be done to stop the smuggling. One note of caution is that, as we consider how to stop nuclear smuggling by inspections and other means, we must also consider the needs of legitimate commerce to keep goods moving.

The GAO reports show that much more can and should be done to secure nuclear materials where they are stored, and to prevent these materials from moving across international borders illegally. The nuclear threat is one of the gravest facing this country and the world. The Administration and Congress must provide more resources, more effective attention to the problem, and more international cooperation with our friends and allies to stop the illegal trafficking of nuclear and radiological materials worldwide.

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