



Highlights of [GAO-06-1128T](#), testimony before the Subcommittee on National Security, Emerging Threats, and International Relations, Committee on Government Reform, House of Representatives

## Why GAO Did This Study

The International Atomic Energy Agency's (IAEA) safeguards system has been a cornerstone of U.S. efforts to prevent nuclear weapons proliferation since the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) was adopted in 1970. Safeguards allow IAEA to verify countries' compliance with the NPT. Since the discovery in 1991 of a clandestine nuclear weapons program in Iraq, IAEA has strengthened its safeguards system. In addition to IAEA's strengthened safeguards program, there are other U.S. and international efforts that have helped stem the spread of nuclear materials and technology that could be used for nuclear weapons programs. This testimony is based on GAO's report on IAEA safeguards issued in October 2005 (*Nuclear Nonproliferation: IAEA Has Strengthened Its Safeguards and Nuclear Security Programs, but Weaknesses Need to Be Addressed*, GAO-06-93 [Washington, D.C.: Oct. 7, 2005]). This testimony is also based on previous GAO work related to the Nuclear Suppliers Group—a group of more than 40 countries that have pledged to limit trade in nuclear materials, equipment, and technology to only countries that are engaged in peaceful nuclear activities—and U.S. assistance to Russia and other countries of the former Soviet Union for the destruction, protection, and detection of nuclear material and weapons.

[www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-06-1128T](http://www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-06-1128T).

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on the link above. For more information, contact Gene Aloise at (202) 512-3841 or [aloise@gao.gov](mailto:aloise@gao.gov).

# NUCLEAR NONPROLIFERATION

## IAEA Safeguards and Other Measures to Halt the Spread of Nuclear Weapons and Material

### What GAO Found

IAEA has taken steps to strengthen safeguards, including conducting more intrusive inspections, to seek assurances that countries are not developing clandestine weapons programs. IAEA has begun to develop the capability to independently evaluate all aspects of a country's nuclear activities. This is a radical departure from the past practice of only verifying the peaceful use of a country's declared nuclear material. However, despite successes in uncovering some countries' undeclared nuclear activities, safeguards experts cautioned that a determined country can still conceal a nuclear weapons program. In addition, there are a number of weaknesses that limit IAEA's ability to implement strengthened safeguards. First, IAEA has a limited ability to assess the nuclear activities of 4 key countries that are not NPT members—India, Israel, North Korea, and Pakistan. Second, more than half of the NPT signatories have not yet brought the Additional Protocol, which is designed to give IAEA new authority to search for clandestine nuclear activities, into force. Third, safeguards are significantly limited or not applied to about 60 percent of NPT signatories because they possess small quantities of nuclear material, and are exempt from inspections, or they have not concluded a comprehensive safeguards agreement. Finally, IAEA faces a looming human capital crisis caused by the large number of inspectors and safeguards management personnel expected to retire in the next 5 years.

In addition to IAEA's strengthened safeguards program, there are other U.S. and international efforts that have helped stem the spread of nuclear materials and technology. The Nuclear Suppliers Group has helped to constrain trade in nuclear material and technology that could be used to develop nuclear weapons. However, there are a number of weaknesses that could limit the Nuclear Suppliers Group's ability to curb proliferation. For example, members of the Suppliers Group do not always share information about licenses they have approved or denied for the sale of controversial items to nonmember states. Without this shared information, a member country could inadvertently license a controversial item to a country that has already been denied a license from another member state.

Since the early 1990s, U.S. nonproliferation programs have helped Russia and other former Soviet countries to, among other things, secure nuclear material and warheads, detect illicitly trafficked nuclear material, and eliminate excess stockpiles of weapons-usable nuclear material. However, these programs face a number of challenges which could compromise their ongoing effectiveness. For example, a lack of access to many sites in Russia's nuclear weapons complex has significantly impeded the Department of Energy's progress in helping Russia secure its nuclear material. U.S. radiation detection assistance efforts also face challenges, including corruption of some foreign border security officials, technical limitations of some radiation detection equipment, and inadequate maintenance of some equipment.