

Opening Statement of
Senator Susan M. Collins

**“World at Risk: A Report from the Commission
on the Prevention of Weapons of Mass
Destruction Proliferation and Terrorism.”**

Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs
December 11, 2008

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The “World at Risk” report reinforces the sense of urgency that this Committee has felt during its many hearings on deadly threats to the American people – threats that include terrorists dispersing anthrax spores, detonating a nuclear device in a major city, or striking with other weapons of mass destruction.

As the Chairman has indicated, the Commission has warned that it is “more likely than not that a weapon of mass destruction will be used in a

terrorist attack somewhere in the world by the end of 2013;" the Commission's report is a call to action.

This Committee has created the Department of Homeland Security, reformed our intelligence agencies, strengthened FEMA, increased grants for state and local first responders, and enhanced security of our seaports and chemical facilities. As the Commission observes, however, "the terrorists have been active, too," and we must continue our efforts. Nuclear proliferation and advances in biotechnology give terrorists new means to carry out their avowed intention to commit mass murder.

The Commission has laid out three main sources of concern: the proliferation of nuclear weapons technology, the growing threat of biological

weapons, and the special challenges relating to Pakistan.

Having heard chilling testimony on the effects of even a suitcase nuclear weapon in a city like New York or Washington, I share the Commission's concern about nuclear developments in places like North Korea, Iran, and Pakistan, and the challenge of securing nuclear materials in the former Soviet bloc.

The mental images of nuclear blasts and mushroom clouds are powerful and frightening. But as the Commission rightly notes, the more likely threat is from a biological weapon. In contrast to nuclear weapons, there is a lower technological threshold to develop and disseminate bio- weapons, access to pathogens is more widespread, and pathogens are harder to contain. The spread of

biotechnology, the difficulty of detecting such pathogens, and terrorists' known interest in bioterrorism combine to produce an even greater menace.

Bio- weapons are appealing to terrorists in part because we are unlikely to realize that an attack has occurred before it begins to kill many of its victims. In the early stages of an anthrax attack, for example, health care providers are likely to believe that they are simply seeing a flu outbreak.

That worldwide security has lagged behind the growth of this threat is sobering. Even within our own country, the Commission found that we fail to secure potential biological weapons effectively.

Thousands of individuals in the United States have access to dangerous pathogens. Currently

there are about 400 research facilities and nearly 15,000 individuals in the U.S. authorized to handle the deadly pathogens on the “Select Agent List.” Many other research facilities handle less strictly controlled, yet still dangerous, pathogens with no regulation. Still others could be developing synthetic pathogens with little or no regulation of their activities.

In addition to concerns about controls within our own country, the global security concerns are daunting. Countries like Syria do not adhere to the Biological Weapons Convention, the multilateral treaty that banned the development, production, and stockpiling of biological weapons. There are also concerns that other countries that signed the treaty may nevertheless be violating it.

Beyond these security considerations, there is more that our country should do to develop effective countermeasures and vaccines.

The recent attacks in Mumbai and Afghanistan have focused the world's attention on another tinderbox identified by the Commission: the country of Pakistan. The confluence of terrorist mindsets, nuclear capability, and political instability in Pakistan creates enormous challenges. That country's history of poor control over its nuclear technology, heightened tensions with its nuclear-armed neighbor India, and the existence of terrorist training camps and safe havens are a dangerous combination.

The Commission has offered 13 key recommendations. They cover an enormous range,

including better oversight of critical biological-materials labs, strengthening the International Atomic Energy Agency, countering extremist ideology, building a 21st-century national-security workforce, removing jurisdictional obstacles to effective Congressional oversight, and engaging citizens in the challenge of preparedness.

We may differ on specific recommendations, but I believe the Commission has identified vital threats and given us a clearly drawn road map toward improved security against terrorist use of weapons of mass destruction.

The Commission has produced the independent analysis that Senator Lieberman and I envisioned when we included the WMD Commission as part of our 2007 homeland-security legislation. I commend

the Commissioners and their staff for their contributions.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

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