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Contact: Jesse Broder Van Dyke
(202) 224-6361

Statement of Senator Daniel K. Akaka
“A Review of U.S. International efforts to Secure Radiological Materials”
Subcommittee on Oversight of Government Management,
the Federal Workforce, and the District of Columbia

Washington, D.C. – U.S. Senator Daniel K. Akaka chaired today’s hearing on **“A Review of U.S. International efforts to Secure Radiological Materials”** in the *Senate Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Subcommittee on Oversight of Government Management, the Federal Workforce, and the District of Columbia*.

Chairman Akaka said purpose of the hearing was to look into *“why funds to control high risk radioactive sources are being cut, while interest by al Qaeda and other terrorist organizations in stealing them and making them into ... dirty bombs, is increasing.”*

Chairman Akaka’s opening statement appears below:

“Today’s hearing — A Review of the U.S. International Efforts to Secure Radiological Materials — will examine activities by the Department of Energy and Nuclear Regulatory Commission to help secure high risk radioactive sources worldwide, both bilaterally, and in cooperation with the International Atomic Energy Agency. We will also hear from the Health Physics Society about its work under the Radiation Safety without Borders program.

“Our hearing seeks to address why funds to control high risk radioactive sources are being cut, while interest by al Qaeda and other terrorist organizations in stealing them and making them into Radiological Dispersion Devices, commonly known as dirty bombs, is increasing, not decreasing. I’d like to lay out a scenario that illustrates my deep concern about these cuts. On March 28, 2006, the Government Accountability Office testified before the Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations that GAO had conducted an undercover operation to purchase two radioactive sources and transport them across two U.S. borders. I was disturbed to learn that GAO was able to use counterfeit documentation modeled after those found on the internet and counterfeit bills of lading to purchase over the phone one of the most common radioisotopes used in industry.

“The ease with which GAO was able to obtain enough radioactive sources to manufacture a dirty

bomb these radioactive sources should concern all Americans. But what worries me even more is how easy it would be to conduct the very same operation in another country, one with fewer resources than we have, to adequately control radioactive sources. What if this was an al Qaeda operative or Chechen rebel trying to obtain a source to use in a dirty bomb in the U.S. rather than a GAO investigation?

“Unfortunately, this is a very real possibility. There are documented efforts of terrorists trying to get these sources. Osama Bin Laden has explicitly stated that acquisition of a nuclear weapon is a “religious duty”. The IAEA has documented 516 confirmed cases of trafficking or loss of highly radioactive sources. In contrast, the IAEA has documented 224 incidents involving nuclear materials, most of which involve natural or depleted uranium.

“A terrorist has three choice targets:

- First on the terrorist wish-list is plutonium or highly enriched uranium; with this, a terrorist can make a nuclear bomb.
- Second on his wish list is nuclear material for an improvised nuclear device, or IND.
- Third is a radioactive source.

“The first two are hard to obtain; the third is widely available. It can be found in every hospital in the world with an x-ray machine. This is why I have convened this hearing today, and it is why I have asked GAO to examine this issue at least four times over the last four years. The threat that an al Qaeda operative could steal a radioactive source from a hospital, for example, is very real. This is the bottom line: **it is far easier to procure a radioactive source than it is to steal or obtain highly enriched uranium or plutonium and detonate it in a nuclear weapon or improvised nuclear device.** Detection equipment, as the GAO undercover operation revealed, does not deter acquiring material. It is the last line of defense, not the first.

“And that is why I oppose the Administration’s proposed funding cuts to DOE to help ensure that these high risk sources do not find their way into the U.S. Nor has the Administration given the NRC enough funding to help strengthen regulatory control of these sources in other countries. The job is not finished and the threat is growing. Yet, funding is being cut. Why? The purpose of this hearing is to answer that critical question.”

FULL STATEMENT FOR THE RECORD

Today’s hearing — A Review of the U.S. International Efforts to Secure Radiological Materials — will examine activities by the Department of Energy (DOE) and Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC) to help secure high risk radioactive sources worldwide, both bilaterally, and in cooperation with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA). We will also hear from the Health Physics Society about its work under the “Radiation Safety without Borders” program. I would like to commend both DOE and NRC for their tireless efforts to help protect the public, both here and internationally, against inadvertent access to and malicious use of these materials.

It is a stated goal of Al Qaeda to acquire a nuclear weapon and to use it against the U.S. and its allies. A number of attempts by Al Qaeda operatives to acquire nuclear

materials have been documented or reported on since the 1990s and in 2002 documents were found in a house in Kabul reportedly used by al Qaeda operatives that outlined efforts to build a nuclear device. In January, the New York Times reported on a second attempt by a Russian national to sell uranium in Georgia to a "Muslim man from a 'serious organization'". Luckily, this was a sting operation and the Russian broker was arrested. A similar incident in 2003 also ended in the arrest of the perpetrators. Nonetheless, the Illicit Trafficking Database (ITDB) at the IAEA has recorded 224 incidents involving nuclear materials between 1993 and 2005. While the majority of those incidents involved natural or depleted uranium, 16 of them are confirmed incidents involving trafficking in Highly Enriched Uranium (HEU) or plutonium.

Although al Qaeda and other factions continue in their attempts to acquire sufficient nuclear material and the know-how to build a nuclear weapon, their efforts have thus far been thwarted. Getting enough Highly Enriched Uranium (HEU) or plutonium to build an improvised nuclear device (IND) is not very likely. However, the third option, acquiring a radioactive source, is likely to be far easier. The IAEA's trafficking database has recorded 516 incidents involving radioactive sources, the majority of which have been thefts or losses of the highly radioactive Cesium-137 and Americium-241. Based on these numbers, and in light of the fact that untold numbers of radioactive sources exist around the world, the likelihood that al Qaeda or some other organization intent on harming Americans can get one of these sources, encase it in explosives, and detonate it in a population center is fairly high.

I have asked the Government Accountability Office (GAO) to produce a report on U.S. efforts to help secure these radioactive sources worldwide and they are here today to discuss their findings. This is the fourth report on radioactive source control that GAO has done at my request and I have continued to work to keep this subject in the spotlight. In 2005, I succeeded in getting language into the Energy Policy Act that would strengthen the U.S. capability to safely and securely dispose of low-level radioactive waste, including sources.

What concerns me deeply is that the focus on the risk of an RDD and on securing radioactive sources that can be used in an RDD has waned, but the risk has not. Al Qaeda's interest in getting radioactive material has not waned. We cannot allow our attention to be diverted from this critical task. We cannot forget that getting one of these sources is far easier than getting nuclear material. They are in hospitals. They are in oil rigs. They are in dentists offices. They are easy to get to. But, the Administration seems to have forgotten this. The proposed FY08 DOE budget again cuts funding for efforts to secure radioactive sources internationally. From a high of \$29.7 million in FY04, GAO has found that this important program is slated to receive a paltry \$6 million in FY08 and that future funding is uncertain because of a commitment made by President Bush at the 2005 U.S-Russia summit in Bratislava and the greater emphasis on securing special nuclear materials.

The problem is that the job on securing sources is not done.

The problem is that the likelihood of getting a radioactive source is much higher than that of getting HEU or plutonium.

The goal of ensuring that sources in places like Russia, Ukraine, Georgia and Bulgaria has not yet been completed. Where work has been done, there are no guarantees that these sources will remain secure over the long term. Both DOE and the NRC have programs in place to conduct this work.

The problem is that they are not getting the funding they need to finish the job.

In 2002, DOE established the International Radiological Threat Reduction (IRTR) program to secure high risk radioactive sources. That program initially sought to improve the physical security of radioactive sources around the former Soviet Union, a number of which have been abandoned following the collapse of the Soviet government. It was later expanded to many other countries around the world. However, GAO points out that the upgrades DOE has implemented in this program may not be effective over the long term.

One of the most potent and cost-effective means to ensure the long-term control of radioactive sources is to strengthen the regulatory infrastructures of user countries. In recognition of this need, the NRC, through its Office of International Programs (OIP), began small-scale efforts to work with counterpart regulatory bodies in countries such as Armenia and Kazakhstan to help strengthen their control of radioactive sources. I should note that NRC has done this without having been provided any appropriated funds to do so.

I want to thank all of our witnesses today — especially those of you who traveled here from out of town. Your testimony has been informative and somewhat disturbing. It has also served to remind all of us that the threat of RDDs has not gone away. These sources, when not adequately secured, continue to be a risk to the safety and security of the U.S. and to the rest of the world. It is inexcusable that sufficient funding for DOE and NRC activities to secure radioactive sources internationally is not being made available. Al Qaeda's desire to acquire a radioactive source and to fashion it into an RDD to inflict destruction upon the American people, or the people of any country, has not waned. It has not dissipated. In response, our efforts cannot wane. Attention to these critical efforts cannot be diverted.

It is therefore my intention, as a member of the Energy Committee and as Chair of this Subcommittee, to press for sufficient funding for both DOE and NRC to continue their valuable efforts to help other countries secure radioactive sources. I will also continue to highlight the need to secure these sources, both here in the U.S. and around the world.