

Main page
News
Business
Opinion
- Letters
Time Out
- Arts & Culture
- Life in Japan
TechnoTimes
Sports
Cabinet profiles
** Search **
<hr/>
Subscribe
Advertising
About us
Contact us
<hr/>

The looming specter of nuclear terror

By B. GAUTAM
Special to The Japan Times

The fall of Kabul merely adds to the woes of a world that is increasingly worrying about deadly nuclear weapons falling into the hands of desperadoes.

There are now confirmed reports of at least 10 Pakistani scientists helping the Taliban and Osama bin Laden's al-Qaeda to set up nuclear facilities in Afghanistan.

Although Islamabad detained some of these scientists -- among them Sultan Bashiruddin Mahmood, considered to be the father of Pakistan's nuclear program -- two grave concerns remain.

First, very few people believe that men like Mahmood could have helped the Taliban and bin Laden without the explicit approval of Islamabad, and the recent detentions were perhaps an eyewash to fool the global community.

Second, the Taliban and the al-Qaeda terrorist group may already have nuclear knowledge and even the laboratories to build the bombs. The labs, called "mills" -- which the U.S. believes have facilities to assemble and produce nuclear arms -- were targeted during the current American bombing of Afghanistan.

Experts argue that despite this lack of clarity and confirmation -- about whether bin Laden and his hosts, the Taliban, have acquired nuclear capability -- the world must act, and act fast. It must act on the presumption that the Saudi terrorist has the power to wreak havoc.

One must not forget that what had hitherto been considered to be sheer Hollywood fantasies were played out on Sept. 11, to the horror of each one of us. Nobody thought, least of all Washington, that bin Laden could possess the sophistication -- and the audacity -- to fly planes into New York and the Pentagon, killing thousands of people.

Leaders of many countries have been acknowledging that one cannot rule out much bigger "catastrophic terrorist acts" in the near future. The worst could be a nuclear explosion in a large city or urban agglomeration: In Japan very few people have forgotten -- even after more than 50 years -- the deadly damage and terrible suffering an atomic device can inflict.

There are some who wonder what would have happened had al-Qaeda attacked the World Trade Center with a vehicle containing nuclear explosives. The WTC, along with most of the surrounding areas, would have then disappeared. Hundreds of thousands of men, women and children would have perished or fallen ill from radiation-induced diseases.

Also of equal concern is the possibility of theft of nuclear material. Some extremist organization could have stolen a nuclear weapon or two. The head of the directorate of the Russian Defense Ministry just reported two incidents in which terrorists had recently tried, though unsuccessfully, to break into the country's nuclear-arms storage sites. If this can happen in Russia, it could well happen in Afghanistan or anywhere else, India included.

Further, if al-Qaeda obtains 20 kg of highly enriched uranium, or less than half that weight in plutonium, it could make a nuclear device in about 10 months. The

- [Weekly News Roundup](#)

- [Festivals in Japan](#)

[Cartoons !](#)

Japan Times
Affiliations:

hurdle here is fissionable material, which is expensive and difficult to manufacture.

But as a one-time director of the U.S. Livermore Laboratories wrote: "If the essential nuclear materials like these are at hand, it is possible to make an atomic bomb using the information that is available in the open literature." He was obviously referring to the Internet.

This sounds all the more ominous given the fact that al-Qaeda members have often boasted of their capability to explode Hiroshima-type atom bombs. Some of these messages have been intercepted by the CIA in the past, and there is no mistaking the authenticity of these notes.

And bin Laden himself has declared that acquiring nuclear arms is a "religious duty." The video tapes that have been discovered in his hideouts offer a chilling glimpse into the workings of his mind.

What is more, when the mujahedin defeated the former Soviet Union in Afghanistan, the superpower concept was dealt a crushing blow. The latest attacks in the U.S. must have only emboldened terrorists like bin Laden, who is probably convinced that the so-called strength of a superpower is just a myth or fallacy.

As the noose tightens around bin Laden, there is an increasing fear that he may do something desperate to harm humanity. One can only keep one's fingers crossed.

B. Gautam is a journalist with a leading Indian newspaper.

The Japan Times: Dec. 1, 2001

(C) All rights reserved

[NEWS](#) / [BUSINESS](#) / [OPINION](#) / [ARTS & CULTURE](#) / [LIFE IN JAPAN](#) / [TECHNOTIMES](#)
[/ SPORTS](#) / [FESTIVALS](#) / [CARTOONS](#) / [SUBSCRIBE](#)