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# U.S. Fears Bin Laden Made Nuclear Strides

## Concern Over 'Dirty Bomb' Affects Security

By Bob Woodward, Robert G. Kaiser and David B. Ottaway  
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Tuesday, December 4, 2001; Page A01

U.S. intelligence agencies have recently concluded that Osama bin Laden and his al Qaeda terrorist network may have made greater strides than previously thought toward obtaining plans or materials to make a crude radiological weapon that would use conventional explosives to spread radioactivity over a wide area, according to U.S. and foreign sources.

Some of the conclusions come from interrogations of captured al Qaeda members or associates. Some come from evidence gathered in the last month on the ground in Afghanistan by CIA officers and U.S. Special Forces from former al Qaeda facilities.

In addition, recent U.S. intelligence reports describe a meeting within the last year in which bin Laden was present when one of his associates produced a canister that allegedly contained radioactive material. The associate waved the canister in the air as proof of al Qaeda's progress and seriousness in trying to build a nuclear device.

The U.S. government last month urgently asked a few key allied governments to assist in determining whether the associate, identified only with a common name, may have entered their countries, perhaps with radioactive material. The concern is sufficiently deep that some countries have adopted extreme security procedures at their borders, including the increased use of devices that measure radioactivity, the sources said.

There is no conclusive evidence that bin Laden or his associates have built a radiological bomb or even have the capability to do so, these sources emphasized. But for years bin Laden has said publicly he was working to obtain a nuclear capability.

U.S. officials are very concerned that any nuclear detonation by al Qaeda would be a calamitous psychological setback to the war on terrorism, and a maximum effort has been launched to detect and prevent the possibility, remote as it might be, several sources said. The worry about al Qaeda's efforts to obtain a nuclear

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capability was a factor in the decision yesterday to issue another national alert about possible terrorist attacks, a senior source said.

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On at least one occasion, the White House cited the increased concern that al Qaeda might have a radiological bomb as a key reason that Vice President Cheney was not available for a face-to-face meeting with visiting senior foreign officials. The meeting usually would have allowed for informal personal contact, but took place via secure video conference because Cheney was at a secure location outside Washington.

U.S. intelligence agencies are looking not only for evidence that terrorists could be assembling a radiological bomb but also for any sign that al Qaeda could be trying to make a very crude and small atomic or fission bomb.

A radiological bomb, also known as a "dirty bomb," could be made by taking highly radioactive material, such as spent reactor fuel rods, and wrapping it around readily available conventional high explosives. The device is designed to kill or injure not through its explosive force but by creating a zone of intense radiation that could extend several city blocks. A large, highly radioactive bomb could affect a much larger area.

There is no public record that any country or terrorist group has detonated a radiological bomb.

A diagram of a dirty bomb has been found in a Taliban or al Qaeda installation in Afghanistan in recent weeks, according to a source. In addition, numerous other documents about nuclear weapons in general were recovered. But a well-placed U.S. source said such diagrams and documents could be found in public sources, including the Internet. The source said some designs were so inadequate and primitive that they most likely would not work.

Al Qaeda's longstanding interest in acquiring a nuclear capability is well-documented. In February, a Sudanese man who worked for bin Laden for nine years, Jamal Ahmed Fadl, testified that al Qaeda was trying to acquire nuclear material in the early 1990s. Fadl said that a bin Laden lieutenant ordered him to buy uranium from a former Sudanese army officer, who offered to sell ore from South Africa for \$1.5 million.

Though he did not have personal knowledge that the deal was consummated, Fadl testified, he was paid a \$10,000 bonus for arranging the deal. Fadl was a government witness at the New York trial of four participants in the al Qaeda bombing of two American embassies in Africa in August 1998.

Last month, bin Laden told a Pakistani journalist that his movement already had chemical and nuclear weapons.

"I wish to declare that if America used chemical or nuclear weapons against us, then we may retort with chemical and nuclear weapons," bin Laden was quoted as saying. "We have the weapons as a deterrent."

In 1998, bin Laden called it "a religious duty" to acquire weapons of mass destruction, adding: "If I have indeed acquired these weapons, then I thank God for enabling me to do so."

One Taliban official in Afghanistan has denied that al Qaeda has a nuclear capability.

"We do not even have modern weaponry, not to mention weapons of mass destruction," Abdul Salam Zaeef, former Taliban ambassador to Pakistan, said recently after widespread reports of bin Laden's deterrent comment.

Pakistan has detained two nuclear scientists, both veterans of the secret program that has given Pakistan about a dozen nuclear warheads, and is interrogating them about their contacts with Taliban and al Qaeda members. The two, Sultan Bashiruddin Mahmood and Abdul Majid, worked in Afghanistan in recent years but have said they were only providing charitable assistance to Afghanis.

Mahmood is an expert in plutonium, the highly fissionable material used in the heart of most nuclear weapons. He was given a desk job in 1999 after he publicly said that Pakistan should help other Islamic nations

build nuclear weapons. He also spoke publicly in support of the Taliban movement.

Russia and Pakistan are considered the two most likely sources of radioactive material for al Qaeda. Russian officials have reported dozens of attempts to steal enriched uranium or plutonium since 1990. Last month, a Russian general said unidentified terrorists recently had twice tried and failed to penetrate Russian top-secret fortified nuclear storage facilities known as "S-shelters."

Mohamed El Baradei, director general of the International Atomic Energy Agency, said in a Nov. 1 statement that after the Sept. 11 hijackings, the agency had been alerted to the possibility that terrorists might use "radioactive sources to incite panic, contaminate property and even cause injury or death among civilian populations."

On Nov. 9, President Bush said of al Qaeda, "They're seeking chemical, biological and nuclear weapons."

Bin Laden is a fugitive from Saudi Arabia, which along with the United States is considered a top target for another attack. Border inspection and surveillance have been increased substantially in Saudi Arabia; authorities there are on the lookout not only for radioactive material but also for any related equipment, parts or technology that might be used in a nuclear device.

In Saudi Arabia, a source said, border guards are searching any package or truck that might be used by smugglers. Particular emphasis has been given to the Saudi border with Yemen, which has had an active al Qaeda presence.

Operatives connected to bin Laden in Yemen are believed to be responsible for the attack on the American destroyer USS Cole in October 2000, when a small boat loaded with explosives rammed the ship and killed 17 U.S. sailors in the port of Aden.

*Researcher Jeff Himmelman contributed to this report.*

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