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Report: Bin Laden May Be Close to Nuclear Weapon

WASHINGTON (Reuters) - Osama bin Laden, chief suspect in the Sept. 11 suicide plane attacks on the United States, may be closer than first thought to developing a crude nuclear weapon, The Washington Post reported on Tuesday.

Fear that bin Laden's al Qaeda network might be close to developing a "dirty bomb" was a factor in the United States' decision on Monday to issue a new warning of possible attacks, the newspaper reported.

"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," the Post said.

The newspaper said the alert was raised from interrogation of captured al Qaeda members and evidence gathered in the last month at al Qaeda facilities in Afghanistan by CIA officers and U.S. special forces.

"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 newspaper reported, citing unidentified sources.

It said the so-called dirty bomb could be made by taking highly radioactive material, such as spent reactor fuel rods, and wrapping it around readily-available conventional 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," the newspaper said.

It said a diagram of a "dirty bomb" was found in a Taliban or al Qaeda installation in Afghanistan in recent weeks.

The newspaper said recent intelligence reports had also described a meeting within the last year at which the Saudi-born bin Laden was present, when one of his associates produced a canister that allegedly contained radioactive material.

The Washington Post said the United States was sufficiently concerned by the report to ask several key allied nations to help determine whether the man with the canister may have entered their country, perhaps with radioactive material.

"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 used in a nuclear device," the newspaper said.

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