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Al-Qaida might be ready to use radiological weapon

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'Dirty bomb' claim coincides with warning

Matthew Engel in Washington
Wednesday December 5, 2001
[The Guardian](#)

The United States became decidedly nervous again yesterday as the administration's third post-September 11 terrorist alert coincided with a report that al-Qaida might be able to detonate a "dirty bomb" - an unsophisticated radiological weapon.

Tom Ridge, the homeland security director, insisted the two events were unconnected. However, well-placed sources believed that different parts of the administration were sending out the same intelligence message via alternative routes.

The official alert once again contained no specifics about where and how Americans might be attacked. But a leak to the Washington Post suggested that captured al-Qaida members have said, under interrogation, that the organisation has, or is close to having, the ability to set off such a radiological device.

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Radiological weapons represent a primitive form of nuclear technology that was largely abandoned in the early days of the atomic age because the major powers thought it too unsophisticated to be much use.

They take many possible forms, but the most obvious would involve setting off a large car bomb. There would be no need for either uranium or plutonium; the radioactive waste from spent fuel rods could be used instead.

Nuclear experts say the radiation would not be immediately obvious, even after the bomb went off. But such a device does require reasonably sophisticated manufacture and would not necessarily be very portable. Diagrams of dirty bombs have reportedly been found in captured hideouts in Afghanistan, but they could easily have been downloaded from the internet.

The Post report claimed that the US vice-president, Dick Cheney, recently withdrew from a meeting with visiting foreign officials because of fears that they might be carrying a radiological weapon which could be detonated as part of a suicide mission.

However, Daryl Kimball, executive director of the Arms Control Association, said he did not regard a dirty bomb attack as the most alarming threat: "It's not something to be dismissed or laughed at, but it would be qualitatively different from a nuclear attack.

Mr Ridge insisted - as he did when the US was last put on alert in November - that he was telling people everything he knew and had no idea himself how the attack might come. There was "just a lot of noise", he said.

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