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12/06/2001 - Updated 04:30 PM ET
Seven arrested for selling weapons-grade uranium

MOSCOW (AP) — Russian police have arrested seven people accused of trying to sell more than two pounds of highly-enriched weapons-grade uranium, Russian television said Thursday.

The men, arrested in the town of Balashikha just southeast of Moscow, were trying to sell a capsule containing uranium-235 for \$30,000, NTV television said. The suspects were charged with illegal handling of nuclear materials, it said.

If confirmed, the seizure would be the first acknowledged case of theft of weapons-grade material in Russia.

In the economic turmoil following the Soviet collapse, police have regularly seized nuclear materials stolen by people who tried to sell them for profit. But all involved low-active uranium unfit to manufacture nuclear weapons.

Russian officials have repeatedly said no weapons-grade nuclear materials have been stolen.

The report said the suspects allegedly belonged to the Balashikha criminal gang. Police initially arrested those trying to sell the material at a roadside cafe who led them to another suspect who kept the uranium in his house. It did not give the date of the arrest or provide other details.

A duty officer at the Balashikha police station told The Associated Press he was aware of the case, but gave no details, saying the Federal Security Service, the KGB's main successor, was handling the investigation. The officer asked not to be named.

A spokesman at the Russian Interior Ministry in Moscow, which is in charge of the nation's police force, also referred questions to the FSB. A duty officer at the FSB head office refused to comment on the case.

The NTV report contained footage of a roadside cafe where several suspects were arrested and a local police headquarters. It didn't feature any officials who would confirm the arrest.

NTV also interviewed Nikolai Shingarev, a spokesman of the Nuclear Power Ministry, who said there are several plants in and around Moscow where such material could be obtained. Weapons-grade uranium is sometimes used in research nuclear reactors.

Alexander Koldobsky, a senior researcher at the Moscow Engineering and Physical Institute, told NTV the quantity of uranium reportedly seized would be insufficient to make a nuclear weapon.

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