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Friday, 7 December, 2001, 17:50 GMT

Uranium theft raises nuclear fears

Russia retains a vast nuclear arsenal

Russian police have arrested seven men trying to sell more than one kilogram (2.2 pounds) of suspected weapons-grade uranium.

If the material is established to be the high-level enriched variety of uranium-235, this will be the first confirmed case of a theft of this kind in Russia itself.

Russian Interior Ministry spokesman Oleg Yelnikov said the amount of uranium was too small to make a nuclear device, and that it seemed that the men had got their hands on it by chance.

However the incident is likely to increase international concern over the possibility that nuclear material could fall into the hands of militant groups.

"It looks like they accidentally got their hands on the uranium and were trying to sell it," Mr Yelnikov told the Associated Press news agency.

"It's not like they were trying to sell the material to some Afghan terrorists," he added.

Mr Yelnikov said that most of the suspects, arrested outside Moscow overnight on Tuesday, allegedly belonged to the well-known Balashikha criminal gang.

They apparently tried to sell the uranium for \$30,000 to another gang, but as yet there is no clear indication of how they had obtained the uranium in the first place.

Russian nuclear experts are examining the capsule containing the uranium to determine its place of origin and assess it potency.

It is thought it could have come from a nuclear research centre or a production plant.

Nuclear risk

The UN's International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) warned recently that the security and regulation of nuclear material in the former Soviet Union was deficient, and called for greater international efforts to reduce the risk of nuclear smuggling.

David Kyd of the IAEA told BBC News Online there had been 175 known cases of attempts to smuggle nuclear material out of former Soviet Republics.

The largest confirmed disappearance of weapons-grade uranium from the former Soviet Union was in Georgia, where in July police arrested three men attempting to sell 1.7 kilograms (3.75lbs) of uranium-235 to buyers in Turkey.

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