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Also This Month:

IAEA Calls for Tighter Security Worldwide

Mohamed ElBaradei, director general of the International Atomic Energy Agency, is calling on the world to tighten security at civilian nuclear plants to avoid their being targeted by terrorists. The September attacks on the US were a "wake-up call," he told the United Nations General Assembly in New York. Some nuclear regulatory bodies are already tightening security--for example, by putting fighter aircraft on patrol near reactors. France has installed missiles at its Cap de la Hague nuclear reprocessing plant. And Germany's Environment Minister Jürgen Trittin may close his country's nuclear reactors if the risks from attack are deemed too high by a security review panel.

But theft of nuclear material, not terrorist attacks on reactors, still poses the greatest danger, the IAEA warns (see [Physics Today, July 2001, page 29](#)). Twice earlier this year, terrorists were caught spying on a Russian nuclear storage site, Russia's military nuclear security head Igor Volynkin said on television, according to the IAEA Web site. And in April, 600 grams of highly enriched uranium with a black-market value of \$1.5 million was recovered in Colombia. Instead of creating an atomic bomb, a terrorist group might simply attach radioactive material to a conventional weapon to make a "dirty bomb." The effects of the resulting radioactive contamination could be devastating. Even relatively small amounts of radioactive material can cause serious problems. In 1987, Brazilian scavengers stole a 20-gram capsule of cesium-137 and sold it to a scrap yard in the city of Goiânia. Nearly 250 people became sick and another 110 000 will have to be monitored for the rest of their lives. "The deadliness of handling intensely radioactive material can no longer be seen as an effective deterrent," says Abel Gonzalez, the IAEA's director of radiation and waste safety. IAEA officials have initiated a thorough review of the organization's activities and are considering creating a fund to help countries protect against nuclear terrorism. "There have been two nuclear shocks to the world already--the Chernobyl accident and the IAEA's discovery of Iraq's clandestine nuclear weapons program," says ElBaradei. "It will be vital that we do all in our power to prevent a third."

In some cases, employees of nuclear facilities are suspect. In Pakistan this October, physicists Bashiruddin Mahmood and Chaudry Abdul Majeed, past members of the Pakistan Atomic Energy Commission, were taken into "protective custody" by the government amid fears about their close links with the Taliban. Says ElBaradei, "These are unconventional threats that require unconventional responses."

Paul Guinnessy

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