

Jack Kelly: Dirty deeds

Does Osama bin Laden have a radiological bomb?

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By Jack Kelly

Some day very soon, Islamic terrorists may detonate in an American city a bomb that consists of a conventional explosive with radioactive material wrapped around it.

Few Americans will perish from the blast. But thousands will die -- and die ugly -- from the radiation released by the "dirty bomb." And the area affected by the radiation will be uninhabitable long after our grandchildren's grandchildren have grandchildren.

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U.S. intelligence agencies have concluded that Osama bin Laden's terror network has made greater strides than previously thought toward obtaining radiological weapons. A diagram for a "dirty bomb" was found in an Afghan installation run by the Taliban and bin Laden's al-Qaida, The Washington Post reported.

"In addition, recent U.S. intelligence reports describe a meeting within the last year in which bin Laden was present in which one of his associates produced a canister that allegedly contained radioactive material," said the Post in a story written by three of its most prominent reporters.

Pakistani nuclear scientists, working under the direction of a former Pakistani intelligence chief, built the bomb for bin Laden, UPI's Arnaud de Borchgrave said in a recent story.

"One Pakistani general who has seen the evidence described the device as a 'dirty nuclear weapon'," de Borchgrave said. "One local intelligence source speculated a dirty bomb could have been smuggled out before the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks."

A likely route would be to transport the bomb by truck to the port of Karachi in southern Pakistan, and then ship it in a cargo container. About 18 million cargo containers arrive in the United States each year. Only about 3 percent are inspected by U.S. Customs.

Bin Laden's bomb might already be here. A Pakistani rounded up after Sept. 11 died in a New Jersey jail at the end of October. He'd complained of bleeding gums. DEBKAFfile, a private intelligence service based in Israel, said this is a sign of radiation sickness. Authorities are not releasing either the man's name, or the cause of death.

The Israelis arrested another Pakistani trying to cross into Israel from Jordan, DEBKAFfile said. He was suffering from the same symptoms as the Pakistani who died in New Jersey.

It is hard to build a nuclear bomb, even a small one, and harder still to build it without detection. But radiological bombs are relatively uncomplicated. And "dirty bombs" require less nuclear material, which can be obtained from a wider variety of sources. Spent fuel rods from nuclear reactors are ideal for making a radiological bomb, but radiopharmaceuticals can provide harmful doses of radiation, as can certain types of industrial waste.

The catastrophic consequences that would ensue from the detonation of a radiological bomb mean we should be more worried than we have been about how poorly the war on terror is going at home.

The war in Afghanistan has been going well, chiefly because, overseas, President Bush can do pretty much what he thinks needs to be done. But here at home, while the president can propose, it is Congress that disposes . . . or, more often, dawdles.

More than three months have passed since the terrorists struck. But at this writing, Congress has yet to complete work on the defense

appropriations bill, or to pass the economic stimulus package President Bush had requested in September.

No legislative action has been taken to fix an out-of-control immigration system that permitted all 19 of the 9/11 hijackers to enter the country legally, or to beef up security at our borders.

But Democrats in the Senate have taken time to snipe at President Bush for the security precautions he has taken. Democrats don't like it that he is holding terror suspects on minor charges; that he has asked recent Muslim immigrants to submit voluntarily to questioning about what they may know of the terror network, or that he plans to try some terrorists captured overseas in military tribunals.

Democrats act as if Attorney General John Ashcroft were a greater threat to the liberties of Americans than Osama bin Laden. But Ashcroft does not have a radiological bomb. This is no time for partisan politics.

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