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Published Tuesday, December 18, 2001
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EDITORIALS

Toxic dangers

Old security measures won't do after September 11

Even allowing for the author's point of view, the report is sobering. It says that security measures at U.S. nuclear reactors are configured only for modest challenges. Nonetheless, it says, security crews at nearly half the reactors have scored poorly on drills.

The report was written by Daniel Hirsch, president of a California nuclear safety group called Bridge the Gap. It is scheduled for publication in the January issue of The Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists.

Mr. Hirsch has argued that federal nuclear security regulations were obsolete long before the terrorist attacks on Sept. 11. His group has tried repeatedly to get standards tightened.

The rules presume an attack by three intruders with one confederate inside. The attackers are presumed to have light weapons and a four-wheel-drive vehicle. Regulations require a minimum of five guards on duty - in other words, one more than the presumed number of attackers.

That's it. No provision is made for other kinds of weapons, other modes of assault, other numbers or organization of intruders.

Federal authorities say they are conducting a "top to bottom review" of nuclear security measures. Let us very much hope so. Sept. 11 showed vividly that old assumptions are no longer enough, and that our own way of life can be turned against us if we don't take proper care.

Post-September reviews of policy and practice in the chemical industry, for example, spotlighted unsettling information. A 1999 federal report had called security levels "fair to very poor." And problems remain in the sheer quantity of toxic materials stored on some sites, along with methods of shipping them.

Some of the chemicals handled in plants around the country have the capacity to match the 1984 disaster in Bhopal, India, where a leak from a Union Carbide plant killed 2,000 people and injured tens of thousands more. A single accident at one of nearly 50 chemical plants between Baton Rouge and New Orleans could endanger 10,000 to 1 million people, according to "worst-case" scenarios that companies must file with the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.

The danger of chemical shipments through populated areas was vividly illustrated last July. A train derailment and fire paralyzed Baltimore for five days, as hydrochloric acid and other toxic substances burned off or seeped into storm drains.

Experts say terrorists could put common industrial chemicals to a wide variety of awful uses. A security breach at a nuclear plant could produce true havoc. Voices in Congress are calling for a new look at security practices across American industry, for new assumptions about the possibilities of risk, and for strong new measures of protection.

Their call is urgent.

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