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## US investigating whether nukes in country

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Federal law enforcement officials are investigating to determine whether sleeper cells or freelance agents of Saudi terrorist mastermind Osama bin Laden may have smuggled small,

portable nuclear weapons or radiological bombs into the United States.

The deepest concern centers on the chance that bin Laden has acquired and will use a finished nuclear weapon. Rep. Chris Shays, R-Conn., chairman of the House subcommittee on national security, told United Press International: "It's possible, and it's very scary."

He added: "If you asked me if bin Laden really had these weapons, I would say, probably not, but, on the other hand, I wouldn't be the least surprised if there were a nuclear explosion in Israel or the United States."

One report currently being investigated by U.S. intelligence officials came from Pakistani Inter-Service Intelligence sources who had conducted an interrogation of a "terrorist suspect" in early November. Under "coercion," the suspect said that agents of bin Laden had smuggled two portable nuclear weapons into the United States, according to the report seen by a U.S. government expert.

The government expert, who has had access to the Pakistani investigation, said ISI provided "the highest levels of the U.S. government" with materials from the ISI interrogation including a summary of the suspect's confession, which this source had seen. The summary did not give the specific dates of the smuggling, the method, or time of entry. The suspect said only that the smuggling had been carried out, the U.S. government expert said.

The sources of the report "were current ISI officers who had kept contact with U.S. counterparts" they had known from the 1980s, this U.S. government expert said. The summary was accompanied by "collateral" or supporting documents, he said. The package was given to senior U.S. officials in mid-November.

The ISI had not rated the report's credibility but felt it important enough to alert the U.S. government, this source said.

"What was disconcerting about the (suspect's) information was that he knew details of the activation of the weapons and their construction that are not in the public domain," the U.S. expert analyst said.

It could be a nuclear backpack weapon "or some other Russian portable nuclear weapon," he said.

National Security Council spokesman Sean McCormack, asked Thursday about the report, had no comment but echoed past statements that the administration is working to ensure that bin Laden does not acquire or use any weapons of mass destruction.

On Dec. 4, the FBI put 18,000 U.S. law enforcement agencies on "highest alert" because intelligence culled from sources around the globe indicated the United States could expect a new bin Laden attack between mid-December and the holidays. The alert continues.

The FBI has dissolved its central command post, established after the Sept. 11 attacks, and set up separate counterterrorism teams. "They are all

out on the street, that's all I can tell you. They are out on the street looking," an FBI official said.

Jim Ford, a former Department of Energy intelligence official who dealt with nuclear smuggling, said: "The big, big fear is that nuclear weapons have been sold" to terrorists or nation states that sponsor terror.

Peter Probst, formerly of the Pentagon's Office of Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations and Low Intensity Conflict, did not know of the Pakistani report, but said that there is "a great fear" within the Bush administration of a spectacular, follow-on strike by bin Laden aimed at decapitating the U.S. government, using either a finished nuke or a radiological device – a core of conventional explosive wrapped inside nuclear waste such as iodine 131.

Probst acknowledged that, in connection with the latest terror alert, he had spoken with U.S. government officials who had expressed concern over Russian-made "backpack weapons and nuclear suitcase bombs."

Shays said that official records had confirmed that Russia had produced 132 such weapons and that currently 48 remain unaccounted for. All disappeared from Russian arsenals.

Shays added: "We know that bin Laden made strenuous efforts to buy these weapons, we know that security at some Russian nuclear arsenals was terrible, we know that some Russian officials were corrupt. We are told of attempted thefts and of plots that were foiled, but we are never told of the plots that succeeded."

Probst said: "It would seem probable that some (bin Laden) deals for purchasing weapons did go through."

Because of this nagging fear, the FBI is monitoring the major port cities of the United States mainland including New York, Los Angeles, and San Francisco, among others, according to federal law enforcement sources.

Federal authorities are checking any "suspicious" cash rentals of trucks or leases of private aircraft, including flight plans, since a small, portable nuclear weapon could be dropped by terrorists via parachute into a remote area and retrieved by other cell members, U.S. intelligence officials said.

Air freight, thought by U.S. intelligence sources to be particularly vulnerable, is also being carefully monitored because, according to Probst,

"25 percent of air freight is carried by passenger aircraft and is never inspected."

A nightmare scenario would be a hostile nuke exploded aboard a plane by means of a carefully adjusted barometric detonator rigged to go off on

landing, said Probst, adding: "You could have a multiple take-down of aircraft."

"We are not neglecting any possibility in this -- we can't afford to, no matter how farfetched it seems," an FBI official told UPI.

According to U.S. intelligence officials, the weapons could easily have been smuggled in by ship, if the Pakistan report proves to be accurate. "We have zip port security," one such official said.

Stephen Flynn, senior fellow for national security studies at the Council on Foreign Relations, said: "The United States has 16,000 ships entering its ports every day. Adding in shipments entering by truck, train or air freight,

the total of import shipments to the United States is 21.4 million per year."

He concluded: "You could put a nuclear or a chemical weapon in a container aboard a ship leaving Karachi, and that ship will land at Vancouver or Oakland, San Francisco, or the Gulf Coast, and we would never know the difference."

Flynn added that only 3 percent of ship containers ever get inspected.

Stefan Leader, president of Eagle Research and consultant for the Department of Energy, said that bin Laden is known to own 23 ships registered to various companies in various countries. Once on the high seas, "such ships are really difficult to find from a defense point of view," he said.

Russian backpack weapons are also a worrisome priority in the current alert. Said one former senior CIA official: "It's not a big reach at all to say that it's probable that bin Laden has been able to obtain this system."

The Soviet nuclear backpack system was made in the 1960s for use against NATO targets in time of war, U.S. intelligence sources said. It consists of three "coffee can-sized" aluminum canisters, which must be connected before detonation. In wartime, the system required a crew of five, including a commander, radio officer and three Army non-coms.

The weapon was formerly in the custody of the Ninth Directorate of the KGB, responsible for executive protection. Assigning a nuclear weapon to such a group was like "assigning a nuclear system to the secret service," a second

senior CIA official said. Other CIA officials said that assigning the weapon to that directorate probably meant that the teams "were close to the Soviet leadership."

According to information derived from SVR defectors and given the CIA, the three aluminum canisters are carried in green canvas cases with pockets on the outside. All three must be connected to make a single unit in order to explode. The detonator is about 6" long and carried in a "knife-like sheaf." It has a 3-to-5 kiloton yield, depending on the efficiency of the explosion, U.S. intelligence sources told UPI.

It is kept powered during storage by a battery line connected to the canisters.

During the first week of October, Israel's Mossad was reported to have detained a Palestinian attempting to enter Jerusalem from Ramallah who was wearing such a system on his back. The item was contained in a CIA Daily Threat Report. UPI has several times re-interviewed its sources who insisted that the item was in a such a report the first week of October.

Initially, there were conflicting reports as to whether the pack contained a radiological weapon or a nuclear system. UPI re-interviewed the sources who saw the Daily Report item, and they insisted that the weapon was nuclear, not

radiological.

Had the Palestinian been carrying a segment or the whole system? Israel has steadfastly refused to comment, but a former senior CIA official told UPI Sunday "the system is very small and could be easily carried and used by one person." There would be "no necessity to take it in segments."

Another former CIA official said that the Soviet backpack device "was a plutonium implosion" device and, said that UPI's description of it "is

accurate. The physics work."

Probst said of the Mossad item, "I don't discount the report at all. If bin Laden were going nuclear, a backpack weapon is the way he would go."

The backpack system remains classified and is not to be confused with a nuclear suitcase bomb, even though the two are often talked of as though they

were interchangeable.

A nuclear suitcase bomb is "as large as two footlockers," said former CIA counterterrorism chief Vincent Cannistraro. "Bin Laden hasn't got any suitcase bombs. That's just total crap."

But Shays pointed out that "evidence isn't conclusive, and since it isn't, we have to work with the worst case."

According to former Soviet military intelligence officer Stanislav Lunev, suitcase bombs are actually Soviet-made RA-115s that can't be transported by suitcase. According to Cary Sublette in an article for the Federation of

American Scientists, "Osama Suitcase Bombs and Ex-Soviet Loose Nukes," they weigh about 60 pounds and have a yield of one kiloton. The dimensions of the suitcase bomb are 24"x16"x 8."

They are difficult to set up, said Lunev, because a small current of power is needed to store the weapon safely near its detonation site. This means the operator of the weapon would need to run a fine wire up to a

