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Nuclear material found in al-Qaida caves, officials say

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KANDAHAR, Afghanistan - Anti-Taliban fighters discovered low-grade uranium, cyanide and other poisonous chemicals in an underground al Qaida storage facility near the Kandahar airport after they captured it two weeks ago, a senior Afghan commander and senior U.S. officials told Knight Ridder.

"I saw it with my own eyes," Haji Gulalai, Kandahar's security and intelligence chief, said on Friday. "There were large machines, and those things were inside sealed containers. We gave it to the Americans because it was very dangerous, and we do not know about such things."

The U.S. officials, who spoke only on the condition of anonymity, said they have concluded that al-Qaida intended to use the Uranium-238 found in the complex to make "dirty bombs," which use conventional explosives to spread radioactive material over a wide area. In addition to killing people in the bomb blast and poisoning others with radiation, the officials said, such a bomb could render large areas unusable and require lengthy and expensive clean-up efforts.

Uranium-238, the isotope, or variety of the element that U.S. officials said was discovered by the anti-Taliban forces, is used to fuel nuclear reactors and in some medical devices, but it cannot be used to make nuclear weapons.

So far, the officials said, there is no evidence that Osama bin Laden's organization was able to procure either weapons-grade uranium or plutonium - which can be made from U-238 in specialized facilities - to make a nuclear device.

Nevertheless, the officials said, Afghan, U.S. and other fighters have found extensive evidence that bin Laden was trying to make a nuclear weapon with help from at least one Pakistani nuclear scientist. But the officials said that experts in the CIA's Directorate of Science and Technology and in the Department of Energy have determined that al-Qaida could not have constructed a "viable nuclear device" from the plans and specifications found so far in Afghanistan.

"If they had gotten their hands on the stuff they needed, like plutonium, they probably would just have poisoned themselves," said one official.

Al-Qaida, however, could readily have made both "dirty bombs" and chemical bombs using the materials found near the airport, said the officials, and there is evidence that the group was experimenting with both at a camp near Darunta, about eight miles east of Jalalabad.

The U.S. officials said it isn't clear where al-Qaida got the materials, but they said the former Soviet Union and Pakistan are possible sources.

Gulalai said the tunnels where the uranium, cyanide and other poisons were stored were located at Kandahar International Airport, a sprawling complex of several hundred acres about 12 miles south of the city. The al-Qaida terrorist camp known as Turnak Farms is located only a mile or two away.

Gulalai said the tunnels were discovered the day anti-Taliban fighters captured the airport after a 10-day battle with al-Qaida forces.

"They were big tunnels," he said, saying a large truck could drive into each. "It is a big tunnel with many rooms, and every one was filled with bombs and ammunition and these containers."

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During a swing through the region last week, Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld alluded to significant finds at Turnak Farms pertaining to potential weapons of mass destruction.

Marine Corps spokesmen Capt. David Romley and Maj. Chris Hughes said they did not know about the find or the tunnels. "If there are tunnels that we've found out about pertaining to weapons of mass destruction, I don't know anything about it," Romley said.

A nuclear, biological and chemical weapons detection team swept the area around the airport last week, but it is not known if they removed any materials when they left.

The area around the airport and Turnak Farms is laced with a number of tunnels in which virtually anything can be hidden, one soldier noted.

Kandahar International Airport was seized three weeks ago by the U.S. Marine Corps and is now under the control of about 1,500 Marines and other military personnel, including Army Special Forces and Navy SEALs.

Marines and other military personnel at Kandahar airport and elsewhere in the vicinity of the city are operating at the lowest state of alert for chemical, biological or nuclear exposure, indicating that threats are virtually non-existent. Troops at the airfield are not carrying gas masks or other protective gear.

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