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Congressman: Nuke Weapons Vulnerable

By H. JOSEF HEBERT, Associated Press Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) - The Energy Department called allegations of lax security at nuclear weapons facilities ``false and misleading" Wednesday, but a congressman said nuclear materials remain at risk of being stolen by a well-armed terrorist group.

In a letter to the department, Rep. Edward Markey ([news](#)), D-Mass., said he is concerned that a terrorist commando squad could overtake guards at a government weapons facility, gain access to weapons-grade plutonium and quickly fashion a crude nuclear device.

Federal weapons laboratories and other nuclear facilities are protected by private guards.

Markey cited a report by a private watchdog group, Project on Government Oversight, and concerns raised by whistle-blowers within the guard forces. He said that in half of the mock attacks conducted at weapons facilities, the intruders have been successful - a claim denied by the Energy Department.

John Gordon, who heads the Energy Department's nuclear weapons programs, said Markey's concerns are based on ``unfounded allegations" and ``outdated data."

``Charges that there is a 50 percent failure rate in our security tests are simply untrue," Gordon said in a statement. He said such allegations ``create a climate of fear grossly disproportionate to the risks to the public."

``Allegations that the Department of Energy ([news](#) - [web sites](#)) has lax security at its nuclear weapons facilities are false and misleading," said Gordon, a retired Air Force general and head of the National Nuclear Security Administration, a semiautonomous agency within the department.

Markey cited an exercise at the Rocky Flats compound in Colorado, where a Navy SEAL team cut through a fence and in minutes ``were able to steal enough plutonium to make several nuclear weapons." They were detected only when leaving.

In another test in October 2000, intruders at the Los Alamos National Laboratory ``were able to gain control of sensitive nuclear materials which, if detonated, could have endangered significant parts of New Mexico and Colorado," wrote Markey.

Also at the news conference were several former guards at the Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory in California, a federal lab run by the University of California. The ex-guards alleged that their complaints about poor security led to reprisals.

Markey said the private guards and the department's security plans are ill prepared to deal with an attack by a significant number of terrorists with sophisticated weapons. In the Los Alamos test, officials complained that the attackers used a commercially available gas ``to disorient the security forces."

``Experts have told me that that a group of suicidal terrorists could, once inside (a) facility, quickly build and detonate a dirty bomb or a homemade nuclear bomb capable of achieving explosive critical yield," said Markey.

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On the Net:

Energy Department: <http://www.energy.gov/>

Project on Government Oversight: <http://www.pogo.org/>

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