



News Home Page

- Nation
- National Security
- Science
- Courts
- Columns
- Search the States
- Special Reports
- Photo Galleries
- Live Online
- Nation Index
- World
- Metro
- Business
- Washtech
- Sports
- Style
- Education
- Travel
- Health
- Real Estate - NEW
- Home & Garden
- Opinion
- Weather
- Weekly Sections
- News Digest
- Classifieds
- Print Edition
- Archives
- Site Index
- Help

Toolbox
On the Web
Census information
Federal crime data
Economy by region
Stateline.org

U.S. Warns Nuclear Plants of Terrorist Threat

Officials Say They Cannot Verify Al Qaeda Member's Description of Plan to Crash Airplane

By Eric Pianin and Walter Pincus
Washington Post Staff Writers
Friday, February 1, 2002; Page A18

Federal authorities recently issued a chilling new warning that terrorists may be developing a plan to crash a hijacked commercial airplane into a nuclear power plant, but it was based on interviews with a single al Qaeda soldier who was taken into U.S. custody during fighting in Afghanistan two months ago.

A Jan. 23 Nuclear Regulatory Commission advisory to the nation's 103 nuclear power plants said that three terrorists loose in the United States were trying to recruit non-Arabs for a mission to fly an aircraft into a nuclear plant to be chosen by the team.

In the event the plane was intercepted by military aircraft, the advisory said, the hijacked aircraft would be diverted to crash into the nearest tall building.

Officials of the FBI and the White House Office of Homeland Security confirmed the details of the advisory, which was first reported by CNN, but cautioned that authorities were not able to corroborate the claims and are not sure of the al Qaeda member's credibility.

"You can't prove that it didn't have any basis," one senior law enforcement official said. "But everything we checked came up empty, and none of it could be corroborated in any way."

NRC spokeswoman Beth Hayden declined to discuss in detail her agency's decision to issue the latest security warning -- the 20th issued by the NRC to nuclear power plant operators since the Sept. 11 attacks.

"The advisories are a way for NRC to take intelligence information we get from the intelligence community and pass it along to the [power plant] licensees," she said. "Our power plants are still at the highest level of security and they will remain there for some time."

Gordon Johndroe, a spokesman for Homeland Security Director Tom Ridge, stressed that the threat described in the NRC advisory was uncorroborated and did not indicate a specific time or target. He characterized the warning as primarily a reminder to plant operators and others "that we cannot let our guard down."

SEARCH:

News

S

Search Options



Find Post Stories by Topic:

Investigation

Find

--OR--

Search Story Archive by Keyword:

Find

[Advanced Search](#)

- [Subscribe to Daily Newsletter](#)

Top Stories

- [Combating Terrorism: 'It Starts Today'](#) (The Washington Post, Feb 1, 2002)
- [U.S. Repeats Warnings on Terrorism](#) (The Washington Post, Feb 1, 2002)
- [Intricate Screening Of Fliers In Works](#) (The Washington Post, Feb 1, 2002)
- [Full Coverage](#)

Online Extras

Photo Galleries

- [Best of Post 2001](#)
- [Sept. 11 Archive](#)

Video/Audio Coverage

Latest news clips and features:

- [Gen. Franks on Saudi Arabia](#)
- [High Security, Long Lines](#)
- [More Features](#)

News Graphics

Latest graphics:

- [Inside Homeland Security Office](#)
- [Renovation of the Pentagon](#)
- [Fate of Al Qaeda, Taliban Leaders](#)
- [More Graphics](#)

Live Online Discussions

Latest chats and transcripts:

- [Upcoming Discussions](#)
- [America at War Transcripts](#)

Guides

- [Philippines and Terrorism](#)
- [Somalia and the War on Terrorism](#)
- [Understanding Pakistan](#)
- [India and the War on Terrorism](#)

Transcripts

Latest texts and statements:

- [Rumsfeld on Detainees](#)
- [More Transcripts](#)

[E-Mail This Article](#)

[Printer-Friendly Version](#)

[Subscribe to The Post](#)

One FBI official said the NRC advisory appears to be based on a second version of the original report that came to U.S. intelligence from an unidentified foreign country. "It was reintroduced in the American intelligence community, and it was not immediately recognized as the previous information before it was disseminated," the official said. "It took on another life."

Since Sept. 11, the FBI and Ridge's office have issued three general national alerts warning of the possibility of renewed terrorist attacks. The most recent one, issued Dec. 3 during the Muslim holy month of Ramadan, will expire March 11, after the conclusion of the Winter Olympics in Salt Lake City.

Those warnings have been largely based on sizable volumes of credible evidence that another assault could be imminent, and in recent weeks nuclear industry watchdog groups and lawmakers have issued repeated warnings that the nation's nuclear power plants and research laboratories have become prime targets for terrorist attacks.

In a new report, the CIA has warned Congress that the attacks on the World Trade Center and Pentagon and the subsequent anthrax crisis could well be followed by attacks using chemical, biological or nuclear devices.

Publicity about the mailing of anthrax-laced letters to Capitol Hill and major media organizations "has highlighted the vulnerability of civilian and government targets," the agency said in the unclassified version of its regular six-month report to Congress on the acquisition of technology relating to weapons of mass destruction.

The report notes that Osama bin Laden's al Qaeda and several other foreign terrorist organizations have long shown interest in such weapons, particularly since information and technology on them are "widely available, especially from sources like the Internet and the former Soviet Union."

As an illustration, the report notes that crude, handwritten diagrams describing essential components of nuclear weapons have been found in a suspected al Qaeda safe house in Kabul, Afghanistan, according to an unclassified version of a CIA report sent to Congress on Wednesday.

The diagrams explaining use of uranium and high explosives, along with other printed materials that were found, were described as information that was easy for a knowledgeable researcher to obtain, according to congressional and administration sources.

But the finding reinforced earlier reports that bin Laden and his senior officials "showed serious interest" in acquiring nuclear devices, one senior government official said yesterday.

Although the agency said it had "no credible reporting on terrorists successfully acquiring nuclear weapons or sufficient material to make them," it acknowledged that "gaps in our reporting . . . make this an issue of ongoing concern."

In 1988, bin Laden said acquiring nuclear or chemical weapons was "a religious duty," and since the early 1990s he has worked to develop such weapons. At one point his senior aides were in negotiations in Sudan to buy radioactive materials, according to a former al Qaeda member.

Staff writer Dan Eggen contributed to this report.

© 2002 The Washington Post Company

Related Links

[More National News](#)

Full Coverage

[More National Security News](#)

Latest Business News

[Jobless Rate Dips to 5.6 Percent](#) (Associated Press, 2/1/02)

[Intricate Screening Of Fliers In Works](#) (The Washington Post, 2/1/02)

[Enron Says It Can't Supply Data](#) (The Washington Post, 2/1/02)

[Full Business Section](#)

[Full Washtech Section](#)

washingtonpost.com

Personalize Your Post | Go to mywashingtonpost.com

Home

News

Politics

Entertainment

Live Discussions

Photos

Marketplace

Jobs