-- Select a Location --   ▼ GO

U.S. & World

Thursday, January 31, 2002   Go to: **S M T W T F S**
E-mail the story | **Plain-text** for printing

Have terrorists planned attacks on nuclear sites?

By Seth Borenstein
INQUIRER WASHINGTON BUREAU

WASHINGTON - President Bush's disclosure that U.S. forces have found "diagrams of American nuclear power plants" in Afghanistan indicates that terrorists have been casing the plants and researching them on the Internet, U.S. intelligence officials said yesterday.

Bush's revelation, in Tuesday night's State of the Union speech, provoked new concern over security at the nation's 103 nuclear power plants, although an attack would not trigger a nuclear explosion. Experts say the worst result would be massive clouds of radiation.

Some of the nuclear plant diagrams came off the Internet and were not interior blueprints, said a senior intelligence official who asked not to be identified.

But some materials found in al-Qaeda caches in Afghanistan, the official continued, "might lead you to believe they're doing casing" of U.S. nuclear power plants. The strategy fits al-Qaeda's pattern of careful pre-attack surveillance of potential targets.

There is "pretty convincing evidence" that al-Qaeda terrorists have been watching U.S. nuclear power plants, said a second senior intelligence official, speaking on the same conditions. The al-Qaeda teams may have been reporting to a control officer in Canada, the second official said.

The diagrams showed more than one U.S. nuclear plant, the officials said, and depicted specific facilities and their security perimeters. The officials declined to identify the plants, but they said intelligence suggested that al-Qaeda members had been considering attacking the plants with car or truck bombs, boats or aircraft.

Experts disagreed on how useful the diagrams were and how devastating such an attack could be.

Even with the diagrams, "it's not obvious that you could do something dangerous," said Michael Golay, a nuclear engineering professor at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in Cambridge. While an attack could spread radiation, "it's not a very attractive way to do it. . . . I don't think it's something we should be worrying about."

Others are worried about the plants.

"It does tell you we have to do even more to secure them," said Rob Housman, a homeland security planner at Bracewell & Patterson. "This stuff is of real serious concern."

Experts stress that a runaway nuclear explosion is not physically possible. The nuclear material used in U.S. power plants is far less enriched and reactive than that required for nuclear weapons, they said. Also, power plants employ control rods to slow or stop reactions.

"We're not talking nuclear power plants blowing up like nuclear bombs," said physicist Arjun Makhijani, the president of the antinuclear Institute for Environmental and Energy Research, based in Takoma Park, Md.

He worries about attacks intended to release clouds of radiation. "We're talking about severe radioactive material that could cause very dangerous health, economic and environmental problems for very long periods of time."

In effect, a power plant could be turned into a "radiological dispersal device" or "dirty bomb," said Randy Larsen, the director of the ANSER Homeland Security Institute in Alexandria, Va. That's a conventional explosion that spreads radioactive material and with it illness and fear.

That type of attack would not necessarily kill many people, but it would terrorize the public, which is a terrorist aim, said analyst Phillip Saunders at the Center for Nonproliferation Studies in Monterey, Calif.

The nuclear power industry sees no problem.

"Our facilities are designed to protect against a release of radiation" from either an internal accident or an outside attack, said Steve Kerekes, spokesman for the Nuclear Energy Institute, a Washington-based trade association for nuclear power companies.

He said terrorists who could read power plant diagrams "would come to the conclusion pretty quickly that their chances for success would be much greater in some other area."

U.S. nuclear plants have been on heightened alert since last fall. Any specific threats are passed to plant operators, said Sue Gagner, a spokeswoman for the Nuclear Regulatory Commission, the federal agency that oversees nuclear plants.

Earlier this month, NRC Chairman Richard Meserve reported: "Since September 11th, there have been no specific credible threats of a terrorist attack on nuclear power plants."

Nuclear power critics and others, including some Democrats in Congress, are pushing for heightened security at U.S. nuclear power plants, even a federal takeover of the security at the plants.

Seth Borenstein's e-mail address is sborenstein@krwashington.com.