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# Call for fed nuke security renewed

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WASHINGTON -- Sen. Harry Reid, D-Nev., has seized news reports that terrorists may be plotting to fly an airplane into a nuclear reactor and renewed his call for Congress to federalize security guards at nuclear power plants.

The FBI and White House Office of Homeland Security on Thursday confirmed reports that a single captured al Qaida soldier told U.S. officials of the scheme being hatched by three terrorists who are in the United States. Officials stressed that the report is sketchy and cannot be confirmed.

But the Nuclear Regulatory Commission on Jan. 23 issued an advisory about the alleged plot to the owners of the nation's 103 nuclear reactors. It was the 20th security warning issued by the NRC since Sept. 11. In a related event, President Bush this week announced in his State of the Union address that diagrams of U.S. plants had been found in Afghanistan.

Nuclear plants are operating at the highest level of security, NRC spokeswoman Beth Hayden said.

Plant operators, who do not release detailed information about security forces at each plant, have stressed that their armed guards are highly trained. Many guards have law enforcement and military backgrounds, say officials for the Nuclear Energy Institute, a top industry lobby group.

Plant owners strongly oppose legislation aimed at putting plant security officers under the federal jurisdiction of the Nuclear Regulatory Commission, as proposed by Reid.

"What are you going to gain?" NEI executive vice president Angelina Howard asked in a recent interview.

Industry leaders say plant security officers are already an elite force. They say federalizing security will only put a bureaucracy in charge in the case of an emergency, instead of on-site plant managers.

Industry leaders also said a nuclear reactor is a tiny target for an airplane -- one-eighth as tall as the World Trade Center and far narrower than the Pentagon. Multiple concrete and steel barriers protect reactor cores, although it is not known if anything could protect a reactor from a commercial jetliner.

Reid points to security tests in which commandos in mock raids have gained access to plants. Nuclear industry officials say the commandos have never gotten to a point where they could damage a reactor core.

But Reid is adamant that his bill would ensure better-trained guards and will make plants safer from all kinds of attacks. Reid, the No. 2 Senate Democrat, plans to push the issue toward the top of the Senate agenda.

"There is much our nation can and must do to keep nuclear material out of the hands of terrorists," Reid said. "Unfortunately nuclear reactors in the United States are poorly protected against a coordinated assault from suicidal terrorists. This must change."

Reid's written statement was released after he toured Sandia National Laboratory in New Mexico, which is partly responsible for monitoring the nation's nuclear stockpile. Lab officials briefed Reid on terrorist attempts to construct and obtain nuclear devices.

Reid's bill would also call for new plant site security plans and increased security at each plant.

It's not clear if lawmakers will embrace Reid's legislation in the face of significant industry opposition. A similar bill has been introduced in the House.

"Our nation can't afford to have anything less than the best-trained professionals guarding our nuclear plants," Reid, flanked by Sens. James Jeffords, I-Vt., Hillary Clinton, D-N.Y., and Joseph Lieberman, D-Conn., said at a press conference in November.

The Associated Press contributed to this report.

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[Las Vegas SUN main page](#)

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