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SCI-TECH

Pumping up nuclear security

Web posted Saturday, February 2, 2002

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Scripps Howard News Service

WASHINGTON - The director of the Los Alamos National Laboratory isn't worried that U.S. military commandos got hold of a garden cart full of weapons-grade uranium during a 1997 security drill. He said his forces would simply have chased them down a steep canyon wall.

"I don't know where those guys were going to go," said John Browne, head of the New Mexico installation that gave birth to the atomic bomb 57 years ago.

"We feel that the level of security is adequate and up to the challenges that we have been asked to defend," Browne said after an appearance this week at the National Press Club to promote increased federal spending for research into the physical sciences.

Navy SEALs and other elite commando units have tested and successfully breached security procedures at several sensitive facilities containing nuclear materials, according to disclosures made last week by Rep. Edward Markey, D-Mass. The congressman said mock terrorists used a garden cart to transport enough uranium from Los Alamos for "numerous" nuclear warheads.

Browne conceded that the security drill occurred at the Los Alamos lab's TA18 facility that allows scientists to observe how radioactive materials approach critical mass. "It is the only such facility in the country that allows the study of criticality," he said.

But the director took issue with any suggestion that the exercise demonstrated that terrorists could have successfully removed weapons-grade uranium from the area around the lab. "To say they got away with material in a garden cart, well, the fact was that the exercise had ended. We had armed men in HUMVEEs (small military transport vehicles) ready to pursue if that had been necessary."

Had the commandos tried to escape, Browne said, they would have been chased by security units down a boxed canyon with steep rock walls.

Markey also disclosed that Navy SEALs broke into the Rocky Flats nuclear weapons production plant near Denver and could have stolen enough material to produce several nuclear weapons.

Sens. Pete Domenici, R-N.M., Jeff Bingaman, D-N.M., and Harry Reid, D-Nev., concluded a two-day tour of the Los Alamos and Sandia national laboratories on Friday, where they observed antiterrorist preparations and research. Sandia is also in New Mexico.

"I was very troubled to learn that blueprints of American nuclear plants had been found in Afghanistan," Reid said. "Clearly we must re-evaluate all of our nation's potential vulnerabilities. I hope we will get a firsthand look at what our nation is doing to keep al Qaeda's finger off the nuclear trigger."

The senators were accompanied by John Gordon, undersecretary for nuclear security and administrator of the National Nuclear Security Administration in the Department of Energy.

"In the wake of the Sept. 11 attacks, it is more important than ever that key leaders in Washington are aware of all that our labs do, both for stockpile stewardship and in the areas of anti- and counterterrorism," Bingaman said.

Domenici said the federal government remains committed to the mission of the New Mexican labs. "The Bush administration will request significant new funding in its budget for the labs, reflecting their importance and their new responsibilities that will evolve from the war on terrorism," he said.

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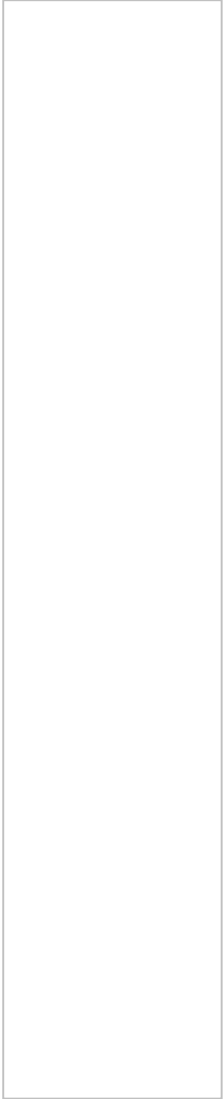
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