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Posted on Fri, Feb. 08, 2002

Nuclear-Weapons Ban Would Fight Terrorism: Doctors

NEW YORK (Reuters Health) - With the threat of nuclear terrorism more real than ever, some US physicians argue that the only way to deal with it is to abolish nuclear weapons and gain international control over weapons materials.

In the February 9th issue of the British Medical Journal, three doctors estimate that if a nuclear weapon exploded in a New York City port, the blast would immediately kill 52,000 and more than 200,000 would die of radioactive fallout or radiation sickness.

And a ``goal-line defense" is not enough to prevent such a catastrophe, according to Dr. Ira Helfand, chief of emergency medicine at Cooley Dickinson Hospital in Northampton, Massachusetts.

``The way to stop nuclear terrorism isn't exclusively through increased security measures," Helfand told Reuters Health.

According to Helfand and his colleagues--all members of International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War and Physicians for Social Responsibility--"as long as there are stockpiles of nuclear weapons in the world, the possibility of nuclear terrorism remains."

They note that there is ``clear evidence" that various terrorist groups have been trying for years to obtain nuclear materials, particularly from the stockpiles of the former Soviet Union. The efforts of the al-Qaeda network--whose members have reportedly tried to buy nuclear materials or complete weapons from several countries--are ``particularly worrying," Helfand and colleagues point out.

They call on the US and other Western states to expand efforts to help Russia secure its large nuclear arsenal, and urge that more attention go toward Pakistan's and India's arsenals and toward preventing further nuclear proliferation.

``The ultimate solution is elimination of nuclear weapons," Helfand said. But in the short term, he added, ``a dramatic strengthening of threat-reduction initiatives" is needed to stabilize the arsenals in Russia, India and Pakistan.

``Unfortunately," Helfand added, ``these initiatives are terribly underfunded compared with other aspects of the US defense budget."

SOURCE: British Medical Journal 2002;324:356-357.

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