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U.S. orders stricter security at nuclear plants

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By Julie Vorman, Reuters
REUTERS

WASHINGTON — The U.S. government on Thursday ordered the nation's 103 nuclear power plants to adopt more rigorous employee screening and guard training as part of an antiterror campaign, but critics said the measures did not go far enough to protect dangerous radioactive material.

The stricter security also means that cars and trucks approaching commercial nuclear plants will be stopped farther away from plant gates for searches, the Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC) said. "The commission has decided to issue orders to require prudent interim compensatory measures because the generalized high-level-threat environment has persisted longer than expected," the NRC said in a statement.

As part of the stepped-up security, plant employees will be subject to new restrictions on where they can go within a facility. There will also be more screening and identification checks for employees and subcontractors visiting plants.

Nuclear safety activists and some Democratic lawmakers have called for National Guard troops or federalized guards to help prevent an attack, which could spew radioactive contamination over hundreds of miles.

They say the plants, even with concrete walls more than four feet (1.2 meters) thick, would be vulnerable to strikes like those on New York's World Trade Center and the Pentagon by hijacked, fully fueled jets.

Concerns have also been raised about potential bomb-laden boats because most plants are built near rivers, oceans, and lakes for the high volume of water needed to cool their reactors. The U.S. Coast Guard has imposed nearly 100 off-limit zones near nuclear plants, and boaters who enter the areas face fines of \$5,000 or more.

The Federal Aviation Administration has already banned flights within 12 miles (19 km) of most U.S. nuclear plants.

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Nuclear plants, which supply one-fifth of U.S. electricity, have long been required to have armed guards, razor wire or fences, and other monitoring devices. The plants also are required to hold drills every few years to demonstrate they can ward off heavily armed paramilitary forces intent on sabotage.

In a speech last month, President Bush said that diagrams of nuclear power plants were discovered in al Qaeda hide-outs in Afghanistan.

Rep. Edward Markey, D-Mass., called the new security measures "too little, too late, and too temporary."

"The Nuclear Regulatory Commission is still operating in a pre-Sept. 11 world," said Markey, a longtime critic of the U.S. nuclear industry. "We know all too well that the terrorists of al Qaeda have contemplated and would carry out an attack on a nuclear facility."

The U.S. nuclear industry, which opposes federalization of guards, said the new security measures merely fine-tune already elaborate procedures. "We're talking about refinements on the margin, given that there are already well-trained and well-armed security forces in place," said Steve Kerekes, a spokesman for the Nuclear Energy Institute, an industry group.

U.S. plants employ a total of about 5,000 guards, with an average of 80 at each plant, he said. Nuclear plant guards must pass an FBI background check and psychological tests, then train some 300 hours before beginning work. Each takes 30 more hours of training annually.

All 103 U.S. plants went on high alert after the Sept. 11 attacks in New York and Washington that killed more than 3,000 people.

Regulators declined to elaborate on the new security measures, saying details could not be made public. They also insisted the new requirements were not in response to any specific threat against a plant. "We took steps immediately following the Sept. 11 attacks to raise the security level of all the nuclear

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plants and have issued more than 20 advisories to the plants since then recommending ways they can further strengthen security," said Victor Dricks, an agency spokesman.

After the attacks, the Nuclear Regulatory Commission took the unprecedented step of halting Internet publication of its daily plant status report, fearing the information could be used by terrorist organizations.

In December, the agency offered to give the antiradiation drug potassium iodide to states that want to stockpile it. The drug protects the thyroid gland if taken soon after radiation exposure.

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