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Russia's nuclear arms deemed vulnerable

By Bill Gertz
THE WASHINGTON TIMES

The system used to protect Russian nuclear weapons is "stressed" by military funding shortfalls and is vulnerable to an "insider" who could circumvent nuclear-missile launch controls, according to a U.S. intelligence report.

The report to Congress also said thieves have stolen an unknown amount of weapons-grade nuclear fuel over the past decade.

"Russia employs physical, procedural, and technical measures to secure its weapons against an external threat," the unclassified report says. "But many of these measures date from the Soviet era and are not designed to counter the pre-eminent threat faced today — an insider who attempts unauthorized actions."

An unauthorized or accidental missile launch is "highly unlikely" as long as the current safeguards are enforced and the central political authority exists, said the report by the National Intelligence Council, an analysis arm under CIA Director George J. Tenet.

Yesterday's release of the 12-page report comes as the Bush administration has warned that terrorists are seeking to develop nuclear, chemical and biological weapons, possibly using stolen nuclear material.

Russian President Vladimir Putin has said that since September 11 security has been increased at nuclear-weapons storage sites and that "terrorists have not acquired Russian nuclear weapons," the report said. It also said security at Russia's nuclear-power plants has been increased as a result of Moscow's war against Chechnya.

The report said that, "we are concerned about the total amount of material that could have been diverted over the last 10 years."

There have been published reports indicating that al Qaeda terrorists have attempted to purchase stolen Russian nuclear arms on the black market.

- Among the incidents identified in the report are:
- Theft in 1992 of 1.5 kilograms of enriched uranium from the Luch Production Association.
 - Theft of 3 kilograms of enriched uranium from Moscow.
 - The 1998 theft from Chelyabinsk province of an amount of nuclear material to produce a nuclear device, according to a Russian nuclear official.

Current warhead-security efforts are aimed at preventing threats "from outside the country," the report said, and "may not be sufficient to meet today's challenge of a knowledgeable insider collaborating with a criminal or terrorist group."

Col. Gen. Igor Valynkin, the Defense Ministry official in charge of warhead storage, stated in August 2000 that "there have been no incidents of attempted theft, seizure, or unauthorized actions involving nuclear weapons."

"Even with the enhancements, security problems may still exist at the nuclear-weapons storage sites," the report said. One Russian military officer told a Russian television station in August that security at warhead-storage facilities was lax, including personnel shortages and broken alarm systems.

The report said the United States is working with the Russian government to increase the safety and security of nuclear-related facilities, infrastructures and personnel.

According to the report, Moscow currently has fewer than

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5,000 strategic nuclear warheads, but will reduce its strategic forces to around 2,000 warheads because of funding problems and aging systems.

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