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Nuclear material nicked

Washington - An undetermined amount of weapons-grade nuclear material has been stolen in post-Communist Russia, heightening concerns that some of it could have ended up in the wrong hands, the US intelligence community has concluded.

The announcement comes amid warnings by top US officials that Osama bin Laden and his al-Qaeda terrorist network have been making a concerted effort to obtain the know-how and materials to manufacture a crude nuclear or radiological device.

"We also believe that bin Laden was seeking to acquire or develop a nuclear device," Central Intelligence Agency Director George Tenet told congress earlier this month. "Al-Qaeda may be pursuing a radioactive dispersal device - what some call a 'dirty bomb'."

In his testimony, the CIA director refrained from disclosing where al-Qaeda operatives could be shopping for such technology.

But the National Intelligence Council, in its annual report to congress made public late on Friday, gave a strong warning that despite foreign assistance and its own efforts to heighten security, Russia still represented a serious nuclear proliferation risk.

'Undetected smuggling has occurred'

"Weapons-grade and weapons-usable nuclear materials have been stolen from some Russian institutes," said the council, the collective analytical think tank for the 13 agencies that make up the US intelligence community.

"We assess that undetected smuggling has occurred, although we do not know the extent or magnitude of such thefts," the report said. "Nevertheless, we are concerned about the total amount of material that could have been diverted over the last 10 years."

A total of 23 attempts to steal fissile materials have been uncovered and thwarted in Russia between 1991 and 1999, according to the document.

The problem remains how many smugglers made off with particles of plutonium or enriched uranium - a hot commodity on the black market - without being detected.

"Russian facilities housing nuclear materials typically receive low funding, lack trained security personnel, and do not have sufficient equipment for securely storing nuclear materials," the council said. - Sapa-AFP

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