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Bin Laden fooled by 'nuclear swindle'

By Toby Harnden in Washington

(Filed: 27/02/2002)

OSAMA bin LADEN is believed to have been tricked into buying worthless metal drums painted with skull and crossbones motifs to fool him into thinking they contained materials he could use to make nuclear weapons.

American officials concluded that the al-Qa'eda leader was duped after tests on three [drums seized in Afghanistan](#) revealed that nothing in them could have been be used to make weapons.

One theory is that the drums were dipped in radioactive medical waste so they would activate a Geiger counter.

But the drums were so thin that anyone carrying them would have suffered radiation sickness had they contained nuclear material.

Military compounds, al-Qa'eda camps, Taliban buildings and caves have been scoured for any evidence that bin Laden was able to acquire weapons of mass destruction.

Two of the drums were discovered at the Taliban's Agriculture Ministry in Kabul and the third at an al-Qa'eda compound near Kandahar. Computer disks and documents detailing black market transactions were also found.

"We did not find any type of serious radiological material," a Pentagon adviser told the New York Times. "The stuff we found in Afghanistan was not the real stuff. They were swindled, like a lot of other people."

Another official said: "All you need is a small amount of medical waste. Pass a Geiger counter over it and you get a positive reading."

President Bush's advisers are now more optimistic that al-Qa'eda does not have enough fissionable materials [to make an atomic weapon or a "dirty bomb"](#) in which nuclear waste is wrapped around conventional explosives.

Mr Bush's main fear is that [al-Qa'eda could link up with a terrorist-sponsoring state to obtain biological, chemical or nuclear weapons](#) for attacks against the West.

In a separate development, US and European security agencies believe that they have made a breakthrough in disrupting al-Qa'eda's arms network following the arrest of a Kenyan in Belgium.

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- ▶ [20 February 2002: Three 'bin Laden suicide bombers' arrested in Turkey](#)
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- ▶ [Arrest aids pursuit of weapons network \[26 Feb '02\] - Washington Post](#)
- ▶ [Terrorism and Osama bin Laden - Centre for Nonproliferation](#)
- ▶ [What if terrorists go nuclear? - American Centre for Defence Information](#)
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