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US Uses Sensors Amid Al Qaeda Nuclear Fear - Senator

By REUTERS

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WASHINGTON (Reuters) - The United States placed sophisticated radiation sensors at the Winter Olympics and at the Super Bowl amid concern Osama bin Laden's al Qaeda network may have access to nuclear devices, a U.S. senator said on Sunday.

“Do we know that they have those devices? No, we don't. Did we deploy radioactive detection equipment in Salt Lake? Yes, we did. And at other places, at the Super Bowl? Yes we have," Idaho Republican Senator Larry Craig said on CNN's “Late Edition."

Craig's comments followed a Washington Post report the Bush administration had been deploying radiation sensors at key locations around Washington and at U.S. border positions, prompted by fears al Qaeda may be making progress in obtaining nuclear weapons.

The sensors, known as gamma ray and neutron flux detectors, have been deployed since November, the newspaper said, citing U.S. government policymakers.

“We know that our enemies seek to acquire means to harm us. The president is focused on preventing attacks from whatever source and I won't discuss any details or specifics," White House spokesman Taylor Gross said when asked about the Post report.

Speaking on condition of anonymity, another administration official said some U.S. Department of Energy laboratories had been involved in developing radiation sensors.

Time Magazine reported on Sunday an intelligence alert sent in October to the Energy Department's top-secret Nuclear Emergency Search Team and other agencies warned that terrorists planned to smuggle a nuclear weapon into New York City. But the magazine said intelligence officials believed the source of the warning, an agent code-named dragonfly, was of “undetermined" reliability.

In the CNN interview, Craig and Senator John McCain, an Arizona Republican, both noted that the United States had uncovered information that al Qaeda was, at the very least, seeking nuclear weapons designs and materials.

Saudi-born extremist bin Laden and his al Qaeda network are blamed by Washington for the Sept. 11 attacks on U.S. landmarks that killed thousands of people.

“We clearly are in heightened alert and we should be," Craig said. “We know that the Taliban and the terrorists were very interested in radioactive material and nuclear devices."

“I'm not sure that it's a reason for panic, but I think it's a reasonable precaution that should be taken," McCain added. “But I have seen no hard evidence that any terrorist organization has acquired these weapons."

The Washington Post also reported that the Bush administration has placed the elite U.S. commando unit Delta Force on a new standby alert to seize any nuclear materials that radiation sensors may detect.

The Delta Force has been given the task of killing or disabling anyone with a suspected nuclear device and turning the bomb over to scientists to be disarmed, the Post added.

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