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March 4, 2002

U.S. Developing Radiation Detectors

By THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

Filed at 9:13 a.m. ET

WASHINGTON (AP) -- The Energy Department is developing a new generation of devices to detect nuclear radiation, a capability that the Bush administration views as vital in the battle against terrorism.

Administration officials said Sunday the emphasis on radiation detection has grown in the aftermath of the Sept. 11 attacks and in response to fears that the al-Qaida terrorist network may succeed in its ambition to obtain either a nuclear device or materials to spread radiation in an urban area.

Several administration officials, speaking on condition of anonymity, said, however, that they knew of no recent indications that al-Qaida had made any new progress toward obtaining such materials.

Separately, Time magazine reported that U.S. officials in October issued an intelligence alert to a small number of agencies indicating that terrorists were thought to have obtained a 10-kiloton nuclear weapon from the Russian arsenal and planned to smuggle it into New York City.

The tip about the suspected device -- which could kill roughly 100,000 people and irradiate 700,000 others, while flattening everything within a half-mile -- was kept highly classified, Time said. Senior FBI officials and former Mayor Rudolph Giuliani were not told of the threat. Investigators eventually determined that the information leading to the alert was false, the magazine said.

The Washington Post reported in its Sunday editions that the administration is alarmed by growing hints of al-Qaida's progress in acquiring nuclear material and that the government has deployed hundreds of sophisticated sensors since November to U.S. borders, overseas facilities and sites around Washington.

Sen. Larry Craig, R-Idaho, said radiation sensors were used at the Salt Lake Olympic Games and the Super Bowl in New Orleans.

"We clearly are in heightened alert, and we should be," Craig said on CNN's "Late Edition." "At the same time, the American people have to get on with their lives. But I want to make sure that they are as safe as we can possibly make them."

Research and development of better radiation sensors is being done by the Energy Department's national laboratories, officials said.

The Post report said newer devices for detecting radiation are placed around some fixed points in Washington. It said the devices are called gamma ray and neutron flux detectors that until now had been carried only by members of Nuclear Emergency Search Teams, which are on standby at various locations.

The Post also reported that Delta Force, the elite military unit with anti-terror responsibilities, has been placed on a new standby alert to seize control of any nuclear materials that are detected by the new sensors.

Sen. John McCain, R-Ariz., said Sunday he was unfamiliar with the deployment of newer radiation sensors. He said it is well known that the U.S. government has been concerned for years about nuclear materials falling into the wrong hands -- whether it be terrorists or governments hostile to the United States.

``I don't know if the administration has new information or not, but it seems perfectly logical that that would be one of the avenues that a dedicated group of terrorists would pursue," McCain said on CBS' ``Face the Nation." ``But whether they have that capability or not, I just don't know."

McCain noted that searches of al-Qaida hideouts in Afghanistan by U.S. forces have turned up plenty of evidence that the terrorist network is interested in obtaining a weapon of mass destruction.

``But I'm not sure that it's a reason for panic," he told CNN. ``I have seen no hard evidence that any terrorist organization has acquired these weapons, although Saddam Hussein, as we know, has been making significant progress in that direction."

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