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LOCAL NEWS

Markey: The best should protect nuclear plants

By Michael Kunzelman

Tuesday, March 19, 2002

Federal troops, not "low-cost rent-a-cops," should be protecting the nation's nuclear power plants from the threat of a terrorist attack, U.S. Rep. Edward Markey said yesterday.

During a meeting with MetroWest Daily News editors, Markey said the Air Force, Coast Guard and National Guard should team up to help private security workers guard the perimeter of every nuclear power plant.

"We need a federalization of the troops, the same way we need a federalization of the security at airports," said the Malden Democrat, whose 7th District includes Natick and Framingham.

Even though nuclear power plants are at the top of al Qaeda's list of targets, federal officials remain "months and months away" from forming a formal set of guidelines for safe-guarding the plants, Markey said.

"We've made some progress, but it still is moving much too slowly," he added. "They still refuse to go into a full-scale rule-making, which you have to do if you're going to mandate on a permanent basis what the new standards are."

Markey, a member of the House Energy and Commerce Committee, is a longtime critic of nuclear power. Less than two weeks after the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks, he sent a letter urging the Nuclear Regulatory Commission to weigh the threat of a deliberate plane crash into a nuclear power plant.

Today, according to Markey, every nuclear plant is supposed to be equipped to defend itself against an attack from more than a dozen heavily armed, well-educated, "suicidal" terrorists, possibly arriving in an aircraft.

Prior to Sept. 11, officials assumed that plants only had to be prepared for a small group of terrorists who wouldn't be well-armed, technically proficient or suicidal, Markey said.

"That was what they assumed a terrorist attack would look like," he said. "Of course, that's all irrelevant now."

Markey touched on a wide range of topics, including the Enron scandal, during yesterday's meeting at the News offices in Framingham.

As a senior member of the Energy and Commerce Committee, Markey is helping lead the congressional probe of Enron and the energy-trading company's collapse. Arthur Anderson, Enron's longtime auditor, also is under investigation for destroying company documents.

"It will be up to Congress to put tougher laws on the books dealing with accounting and energy and telecommunications regulations," he said.

Markey said he sponsored legislation that would hold accounting firms like Arthur Anderson more accountable for clients' misdeeds.

"Are you an accounting firm or are you a consulting accounting firm?" he said. "You decide. You choose how much of a risk you want to run."

Markey also discussed the war in Afghanistan, saying President Bush would need to consult Congress before he broadened the scope of the war in other countries.

He said he thinks Bush has the unilateral power to send troops in "relatively small numbers" to a country like the Philippines. But dispatching a force of 200,000 troops to Iraq would require congressional approval, he added.

"Realistically, Congress would not allow him to act without asking questions," he said. "All of that would have to be debated before Iraq is invaded."

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