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UN says nuclear plants' vulnerability unclear

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AUSTRIA: March 20, 2002

VIENNA - The United Nations' nuclear watchdog said this week that it was unclear how vulnerable nuclear facilities were to terrorist attacks of the scale that shocked the world on September 11.

A report by the Vienna-based International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) obtained by Reuters said nuclear facilities were generally very robust structures, but that their resistance to such attacks could not be easily determined.

"There doesn't currently exist a widely accepted methodology for identifying, assessing and addressing such vulnerabilities," said the report, presented to the agency's board of governors by IAEA Director-General Mohamed ElBaradei this week.

Many facilities are too old to have allowed for the effects of large modern passenger jets with a heavy fuel load slamming into them, as they did into the World Trade Center in September.

"Most nuclear power plants took into consideration terrorist attacks when they were designed and built, but in the 1970s, when many of the plants were constructed and designed, airplanes were smaller and didn't carry as much fuel," IAEA spokeswoman Melissa Fleming said.

According to IAEA figures, there are 651 research reactors, of which 284 are in operation, and 438 nuclear power reactors around the world.

In order to address the security of nuclear facilities, the IAEA has asked member states to contribute around \$12 million annually between them. It said it was seeking another \$20 million per year to help countries lacking funds "to respond to urgent situations that require immediate upgrades".

The agency also wants to track down and recover all "orphaned", or missing, highly radioactive sources that had vanished from regulatory control, the report said.

Fleming said there was no way of estimating how much radioactive material had been orphaned, but added that none of it was weapons grade material.

Much of the missing material is believed to have been stolen from laboratories and hospitals in former Soviet states.

The recent find of highly radioactive objects in ex-Soviet Georgia increased fears that terrorists could add such material to conventional explosives to make "dirty bombs" - intended more to cause panic than physical harm.

Story by Louis Charbonneau

REUTERS NEWS SERVICE



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