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Lawmaker Faults Nuclear Facility Security Policies

Report: Background Checks Of Employees Are Inadequate

By Cheryl W. Thompson

Washington Post Staff Writer

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The Nuclear Regulatory Commission does not know how many foreign nationals are employed at nuclear reactors and does not require adequate background checks of employees that would determine whether a worker was a member of a terrorist organization, according to a report released today.

The report, "Security Gap: A Hard Look at the Soft Spots in Our Civilian Nuclear Reactor Security," by Rep. Edward J. Markey (D-Mass.), a member of the House Energy and Commerce Committee, analyzed more than 100 pages of NRC correspondence Markey had requested from the agency. The report found that although the NRC requires criminal background checks of "prospective employees seeking unescorted access to protected and vital areas of a nuclear power plant," the search is limited to crimes committed in the United States.

"It is unacceptable that the NRC [does not have] a policy on screening of foreign nationals," the report said. "Terrorists may now be employed at nuclear reactors in the U.S. just as terrorists enrolled at flight schools in the U.S."

The report found that security exercises at nuclear reactor sites are inadequate and sites that conduct the exercises fail them half of the time. The report also found that the NRC waited six months after the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks in New York and Washington before beefing up security at nuclear reactors and that the agency has "historically failed" to alter security regulations and has "yet to begin a permanent revision of security regulations."

"Black hole after black hole is described and left unaddressed," Markey said. "Post 9-11, a nuclear safety agency that does not know -- and seems little interested in finding out -- the nationality of nuclear reactor workers or the level of resources being spent on security at these sensitive facilities, is not doing its job."

Neil Sheehan, a spokesman for the NRC, said yesterday that his agency has worked diligently to make sure the 103 operating nuclear reactors are safe.

"We think we've been very proactive in trying to identify any threats against nuclear power plants," Sheehan said.

The NRC has issued 30 advisories to the companies that operate the power plants, advising them of steps to take to better protect the plants, such as checking vehicles for bombs before they get too close to the plant, Sheehan said. The agency also has kept the companies abreast of alerts from law enforcement officials. And NRC Chairman Richard Meserve recently ordered a "top-to-bottom" review of all aspects of power plant security.

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"There are a number of things that have been done and will continue to be done," Sheehan said. "We're not taking any threats against nuclear power plants lightly."

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