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Report: Nuclear plants susceptible to terrorists

By Associated Press, 3/25/2002 04:23

BOSTON (AP) Security at the nation's nuclear plants is so poor that terrorists might now be secretly working at reactors, a Massachusetts congressman alleges in a new report on homeland security.

U.S. Rep. Edward Markey, D-Malden, said the nation's 86 most sensitive nuclear facilities fail to screen workers for terrorist ties, and does not know how many foreign nationals work at plants. He warned of "troubling black holes in homeland security."

"Terrorists may now be employed at nuclear reactors in the United States just as terrorists enrolled in flight schools in the U.S.," Markey said in his report, entitled "Security Gap: A Hard Look at Soft Spots in Our Civilian Nuclear Reactor Security."

Markey, a proponent of federalizing nuclear plant safety, said the Nuclear Regulatory Commission has not sufficiently improved security after the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks.

"The NRC is in the dark about what nuclear reactor licensees are doing to ensure the reactors are safe from attack," Markey told the Boston Herald.

NRC spokeswoman Diane Screnci declined to discuss the report's details, saying that "we don't normally comment on press releases from members of Congress."

She told The Boston Globe that security staff at nuclear plants are fingerprinted, and that minimum staffing levels at plants are included in security plans filed with the NRC.

The NRC fails to check workers for possible terrorist ties, Markey claimed.

"As long as they have no criminal record in this country, Al Qaeda operatives are not required to pass any security check intended to find and expose terrorist links," he said.

Every job applicant does undergo extensive criminal, psychological and employment history checks, according to the Nuclear Energy Institute. But NRC data shows that foreign job applicants are not screened for crimes committed overseas, Markey said.

Terrorists could infiltrate plants, Markey said, the way they did flight schools before Sept. 11.

"The threat is no longer theoretical," he said.

National Guard troops were deployed to many nuclear plants after Sept. 11.

Dave Lochbaum, a nuclear safety engineer with the Union of Concerned Scientists, said existing NRC-required background checks are "somewhat limited."

"I've worked in over 20 plants in the 17 years I was in the industry. Had I wanted to sabotage the plant, it wouldn't have been that difficult to do so," he said.

Markey is a founder and co-chairman of the Bipartisan Task Force on Nonproliferation.

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