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AMERICA'S NEW WAR

Markey warns of nuke terror: Plant security faulted

by Andrew Miga

Monday, March 25, 2002

WASHINGTON - The nation's nuclear plants fail to screen workers for terrorist ties, making the facilities vulnerable to deadly attacks, U.S. Rep. Edward J. Markey (D-Malden) charged in a scathing report released today.

Warning of ``troubling black holes in homeland security," Markey said al-Qaeda or other terrorist operatives could be secretly working in some of the country's 86 most sensitive nuke facilities, waiting to strike.

``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: ``Security Gap: A Hard Look at Soft Spots in Our Civilian Nuclear Reactor Security."

More than six months after the Sept. 11 airliner suicide strikes, Markey warned that the Nuclear Regulatory Commission has fallen far short in its security crackdown. NRC officials were not available for immediate comment last night.

``The NRC is in the dark about what nuclear reactor licensees are doing to ensure the reactors are safe from attack," said the congressman.

Markey, who has led the fight in Congress for nuclear plant safety, queried the NRC about its response to terrorism in a series of letters since Sept. 11.

``There is little comfort to be found in the agency's response to my questions," wrote Markey. ``Black hole after black hole is described and left unaddressed."

The NRC does not require adequate background checks for nuclear plant employees to check potential terrorist ties, Markey alleged.

``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," Markey said.

But the Nuclear Energy Institute, an industry group, says every person who applies for a job at any of the nation's nuclear power plants undergoes extensive criminal, psychological and employment history checks.

Crimes committed overseas by foreign job applicants are not even looked for by plant officials, Markey said, citing NRC data.

Further, the NRC does not monitor plant security spending and how many security guards are on duty at each plant, Markey charged.

The NRC is currently doing a comprehensive review of nuclear plant security, agency officials have 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 . . . is not doing its job."

Markey compared the lax security screening at nuke plants to the ease with which al-Qaeda operatives obtained student visas for flight schools.

``Al-Qaeda operatives such as Mohammed Atta or Marwan al-shehi could pass the narrow nature of the criminal screening still in use at U.S. nuclear plants and gain unescorted access to the controlled area of the plant, just as they obtained student visas to attend flight school," said Markey.

Markey has been a leading proponent of federalizing nuclear plant safety, warning that permitting a patchwork of differing plant security measures only invites disaster.

``The threat is no longer theoretical," the veteran congressman said.

National Guard troops were deployed at many plants across the country in the wake of Sept. 11, including the Pilgrim facility in Plymouth.

Some local officials are calling for anti-aircraft missile batteries to protect Pilgrim.

The NRC has resisted placing anti-aircraft weapons at plants, despite the proximity of many reactors, including Pilgrim, to airports, Markey noted. France and Hungary have deployed anti-aircraft protection for some plants.

Markey's report also found that 96 percent of all reactor plants ``were designed without regard for the potential impact from even a small aircraft."

Concerns about the security of spent nuclear fuels stored at many plants, including Pilgrim, were also raised.

The NRC acknowledged earlier this month that 18 facilities across the country store spent nuclear fuel rods in outside vertical rows. While the so-called casks pose little danger, they are easier targets than reactor buildings.

PHOTOS & MAPS



Seabrook nuclear power plant. (AP photo)

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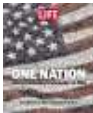
9-11 Terror in America



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Nuclear plants fail security exercises about half of the time, Markey noted, adding that President Bush has cited al-Qaeda documents found in Afghanistan that diagram civilian nuclear sites in America.



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