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Security at nuclear plants assailed in report

Terrorists could pass background checks, it says

By [Paul Choiniere](#) - [More Articles](#)

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Security is so lax at the nation's 103 nuclear power plants that terrorists could be working at them, awaiting orders to assist in an attack or sabotage, U.S. Rep. Edward J. Markey, D-Mass., charged in a report released Monday.



U.S. Rep. Edward J. Markey

Those employed at commercial reactors undergo a domestic criminal background check, but that check is not sufficient to uncover illegal activities abroad or possible terrorist ties among foreign nationals working in the nuclear industry, the report concluded.

“In short, it appears that Al Qaeda operatives ... could pass the narrow nature of the criminal screening still in use at U.S. nuclear power plants and gain unescorted access to the controlled area of a plant, just as they obtained visas to attend flight school,” the report said.

President Bush has confirmed that information about nuclear plants in the United States was among documents seized from terrorist hideouts in Afghanistan.

Markey has long been an outspoken critic of the nuclear industry and the agency that regulates it, the Nuclear Regulatory Commission. He is one of several lawmakers, including U.S. Sen. Joseph I. Lieberman, D-Conn., to introduce the Nuclear Security Act. The act calls for federalizing security forces at nuclear plants and beefing up security rules. Private security forces now protect plants.

The industry reacted swiftly and harshly to the report.

“These are just more baseless allegations from Congress' leading anti-nuclear ideologue,” said Steve Kerekes, a spokesman for the Nuclear Energy Institute. The institute, funded by the industry to promote nuclear power and lobby Congress, accused Markey of “headline hunting.”

“The possibility is that terrorists could be anywhere, couldn't they? Even on congressional staffs. But the

https://web.archive.org/web/20031027180535/http://www.nci.org/02/03f/26-10.htm

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reality is that nuclear power plants are virtually unique in the rigor of the security checks that they put employees through,” Kerekes said.

Nuclear plant employees are subject to FBI criminal checks, psychological investigation, random drug and alcohol testing and extensive reference checks. The industry's employee list also has been cross-checked against the FBI's list of suspected terrorists, Kerekes said.

In his report, Markey contends that none of that is enough to assure that terrorists have not slipped through the system and are now employed at nuclear facilities. The NRC leaves too much of the responsibility for security checks to the companies holding the licenses to operate the nuclear plants, the report concluded.

“It is unacceptable that the NRC neither has a policy on screening of foreign nationals, nor does it know what its licensees' policies are,” Markey said in the report.

Michal Freedhoff, a congressional aide who helped prepare the report, said it is based on more than 100 pages of NRC responses to questions raised by the congressman. In responding to one of Markey's inquiries, the NRC stated that it does not know how many foreign nationals are employed at nuclear reactors.

Pete Hyde, a spokesman for Millstone Power Station in Waterford, said the nuclear station conducts an intensive background check of all employees, including those brought in by independent contractors doing work at the plant. He said he could not imagine a terrorist slipping through the cracks.

“It would be very difficult ... for someone to hide that particular aspect of their life,” Hyde said.

Markey also contends that when nuclear plants are subjected to security tests by undercover teams, they fail about half the time.

“The NRC identified weaknesses that allowed the attack force to reach a target ... and simulate destruction of that equipment,” Markey's report said.

Both NRC and industry officials contend that Markey mischaracterized the results. While security lapses were detected during some of the drills, that does not mean that security systems failed, said Victor Dricks, an NRC spokesman. Security has improved as a result of such drills, he said.

Dricks, however, confirmed that since Sept. 11, the security drills have stopped. The NRC feels that at this time nuclear plant security officials must focus on real threats, and not be distracted preparing for mock attacks, he said.

Dricks said all nuclear plants were ordered to their highest level of security following Sept. 11 and remain there. Additional orders to boost protection levels at the plants were announced by the NRC on Feb. 26, but details were not released for fear of compromising security. At Millstone, more security guards have been added and a checkpoint set up at the access road leading to the nuclear station.

Markey said that because the NRC suspended the drills that tested security “(it) has no way of knowing whether the enhanced security measures it ordered Feb. 26 actually succeed in enhancing security.”

