



News Home Page

Nation

■ National Security

- America at War
- Military
- Missile Defense
- Espionage

Science

Courts

Columns

Search the States

Special Reports

Photo Galleries

Live Online

Nation Index

World

Metro

Business

Technology

Sports

Style

Education

Travel

Health

Real Estate - **NEW**

Home & Garden

Food

Opinion

Weather

Weekly Sections

News Digest

Classifieds

Print Edition

Archives

Site Index

Help

Report Cites Unaccounted Plutonium

Amounts Sufficient to Create 'Dirty Bomb,' Official Says

By *Walter Pincus*
Washington Post Staff Writer
Wednesday, March 27, 2002; Page A09

The Energy Department cannot fully account for small amounts of potentially dangerous plutonium provided under a 1954 Atoms for Peace program to 33 countries including Iran, Pakistan and India, according to an inspector general report released yesterday.

Some of the plutonium, which was packed in sealed capsules, contained between 16 and 80 grams of the radioactive material and "would be a serious health hazard if damaged," an official familiar with the report said.

"They would be able to create a dispersal device," the official said, referring to "our concern being the dirty bomb."

Although it would take more than six pounds of plutonium to create a nuclear explosion, the chemical explosion of radioactive material in a "dirty bomb" could spread minute amounts of plutonium that, if inhaled or ingested, could be fatal, said Thomas B. Cochran, a physicist with the Natural Resources Defense Council.

The Energy Department inspector general report noted that the plutonium capsules sent overseas were supposed to be followed through a Sealed Source Registry, but that program was discontinued by the Reagan administration in 1984.

The capsules, which were distributed under the Atoms for Peace program until the late 1970s, were intended for use in calibrating radiation-measuring devices or for research.

The Clinton administration disclosed in 1996 that the United States had distributed abroad "approximately two to three kilograms of plutonium mostly in the form of sealed sources to foreign countries since the late 1950s."

Among the other countries that received sealed plutonium capsules were Brazil, Israel, the Philippines, Taiwan, Malaysia, Greece, Colombia, Thailand, Turkey, Venezuela and Vietnam.

At that time it was unclear as to the ownership of the plutonium capsules because some were only loaned to foreign governments and others were actually transferred. The report says "it has inconsistent historical data regarding the ownership of the material."

Robert S. Norris, a researcher for the Natural Resources Defense Council, said yesterday that U.S. nuclear assistance to Iran and India under the program helped those governments' efforts to build a bomb.

"The Atoms for Peace program was designed to put a good spin on the atom," Norris said, "and instead it has helped Iran and India to start their bomb programs."

Although relatively small amounts of plutonium are involved, Energy Inspector General Gregory H. Friedman said in his report, "Recent world events have underscored the need to strengthen the control over all nuclear materials, including sealed sources." He added, "In the wrong hands, these sources could be misused."

SEARCH:

News ▾



[Search Options](#)

—Full Coverage—

- [More National Security News](#)

—Federal Page—

- [In the Loop](#) by Al Kamen
- [Federal Diary](#) by Stephen Barr
- [Special Interests](#) by Judy Sarasohn
- [Ideas Industry](#) by Richard Morin and Claudia Deane
- [More Stories](#)

—OnPolitics—

- [Latest Political News](#)
- [E-mail Updates](#)

[E-Mail This Article](#)

[Printer-Friendly Version](#)

[Subscribe to The Post](#)

Related Links

- Full Coverage
- [More National Security News](#)
- [More National News](#)

washingtonpost.com

Personalize Your Post | Go to mywashingtonpost.com

[Home](#)[News](#)[Politics](#)[Entertainment](#)[Live Discussions](#)[Photos](#)[Marketplace](#)[Jobs](#)