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Analysis: The nuclear threat — Assessing the threat from Russia's arsenal

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By **JAMES ROSEN, McClatchy Newspapers**

MOSCOW — In February, three men traveled to the Siberian city of Zheleznogorsk, one of 10 still-closed "nuclear cities" that designed the missiles, produced the plutonium and built the bombs for the Soviet arsenal during the Cold War.

As the men neared the mammoth complex of the Mining and Chemical Combine, two guards gave them a glance and drove on. Within an hour, the men had gone through a hole in the dilapidated fence, scaled a wall and entered a building that stores highly radioactive spent fuel from a nearby reactor.

The infiltrators were not terrorists. But they could have been.

Ten and a half years after the fall of the Soviet Union, the fate of nuclear weapons and materials in Russia has acquired fresh urgency in the wake of the Sept. 11 attacks. Warheads aimed at the United States for decades and the deadly pools of plutonium that fueled the bombs now pose a different threat: the threat of falling into the hands of anti-American terrorists or governments.

Adding to the concern about Russia are the breakdown of central controls, a decline in military morale, crumbling physical facilities, economic woes and official contacts continued from the Soviet era with Iran, Iraq and other nations that are deemed in Washington to be rogue states.

"The accumulation of a large volume of weapons-usable fissile material in the territory of the Russian Federation continues to post an unusual and extraordinary threat to the national security and foreign policy of the United States," President Bush told Congress on June 18.

The Americans and the Russians are once again in an arms race, only now they are on the same side, working together to avert a catastrophe.

The focus on Russia as a giant toolbox for terrorists arises from two main concerns: the breakdown of totalitarian weapon controls since the collapse of communism and the volume of nuclear materials spread over a vast territory.

Sergey Mitrokhin, a member of the Russian parliament from the Yabloko opposition party, was among the group that infiltrated the Zheleznogorsk nuclear complex.

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When Mitrokhin returned to Moscow, he sent a letter to President Vladimir Putin, who then met with Grigory Yavlinsky, the opposition-party leader. Putin promised, according to Yavlinsky, to arrange a meeting on nuclear security with Alexander Rumyantsev, head of Minatom, the Russian atomic energy ministry.

That meeting has yet to take place.

Russia's nuclear materials cover a broad spectrum of potency, from assembled warheads, through plutonium and highly enriched uranium, spent fuel and an array of radioactive junk from hospitals, factories and military bases.

One hundred decommissioned nuclear submarines are docked in the Arctic seas of northern Russia and in the Russian Far East, each with enough uranium to make a small armory of weapons.

"You're worried about terrorists getting the nuclear bomb or nuclear material?" asked Joseph Cirincione, an arms-control analyst with the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace in Washington. "Go to Russia."

Bush and his homeland-security team appear to have gotten the message. The first budget Bush sent to Congress decreased annual spending on U.S. programs to secure and reduce Russian weapons of mass destruction to \$800 million; his second budget, submitted after Sept. 11, seeks to boost such spending to \$1.2 billion.

Meeting in Washington and Texas last November, Bush and Putin said stopping terrorists from securing such weapons had become their governments' top priority. And in Moscow six weeks ago, they set up a group of experts to accelerate control of Russia's nuclear stockpiles.

On June 27, Bush and Putin persuaded other leaders of the G-8 group of industrialized nations to fund a \$20-billion initiative to help Russia reduce its nuclear, chemical and biological weapons stockpiles over the next decade.

Since the Soviet Union ceased to exist in December 1991, the United States has spent about \$8 billion helping Russia consolidate and gradually reduce its nuclear, chemical and biological weapons, with the bulk going for security.

There is a broad consensus that Russia's nuclear stockpiles, thanks in large measure to the U.S. aid, are more secure than they were a decade ago. And there is general agreement that Russian warheads are better protected than the large stores of plutonium and highly enriched uranium.

But the consensus breaks down over how much of a threat Russia still poses as a nuclear grocery store for terrorists or unfriendly governments.

Much of the concern in the West over Russia's "loose nukes" dates to a claim in 1996 by Gen. Alexander Lebed, then President Boris Yeltsin's national security adviser, that 84 suitcase-size nuclear weapons were missing from Russia's arsenal.

However, there are no acknowledged cases of missing warheads of any size or type, from Russia or any other nuclear power.

Since Sept. 11, a number of U.S. government officials and arms-control analysts have cited alleged attempts by al Qaeda operatives of Osama bin Laden to acquire bomb-making material.

But experts who track the nuclear black market are puzzled by their inability to prove such a link.

"You need to see some kind of connection between the willing seller and the interested buyer, but we see evidence of a lack of connection between buyers and sellers," said Rensselaer Lee, a Congressional Research Service analyst who wrote a 1999 book on the topic.

Lee added, however, that intelligence officials and analysts such as himself simply may not have enough information. "It's what we don't see that is disturbing," he said.

Gen. Vladimir Dvorkin, who was responsible for developing Russian strategic nuclear forces before his retirement last year, is an optimist. Sitting in a conference room of the Center for Policy Studies, a Moscow think tank where he now works, Dvorkin declared that Russia's warheads are every bit as secure as the United States'.

And even if terrorists obtained a warhead, he said, they could not detonate it.

"A nuclear explosion is impossible," he said. "You need to know the codes. There are many protection stages. It's a very complicated process, and it is better not to discuss the details."

But Maj. Gen. Alexander Frolov gave a less heartening assessment to a nonproliferation conference in Moscow. He is deputy director of the 12th Main Directorate, the Defense Ministry agency that oversees nuclear weapons security.

"We are facing a growing threat of the use of nuclear materials by terrorists," Frolov said. "They may even go so far as capturing nuclear facilities."



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